ZOOMINGTON: TRADITIONAL DANCE IN A NON-TRADITIONAL MEDIUM

By Randall Cayford

Like groups everywhere, when shelter-in-place came earlier this year, Berkeley Morris was faced with decisions on how to carry on. We practice Cotswold morris, a group performance dance form where sets of dancers interact with patterns of movement. In March, everything changed: in-person weekly practices were gone, and traditional street performances were cancelled. Cotswold choreography calls for interaction with dancers who are now no longer there. While we could have waited out the pandemic, Berkeley committed to continue—continue practicing, continue performing, and, most importantly, continue to evolve our traditional dance form for a decidedly modern world. Styles in the morris world are named after the villages in which they arose, so our new style, adapted to the place in which we dance it, is called Zoomington.

While traditions change over time, there is tension between introducing new ideas and maintaining something recognizable as the same tradition. In our case, the challenge was to change many seemingly integral elements of our dances while still clearly dancing morris. For us, the essential elements of morris are the stepping, the figures, the interaction among the dancers in the set, and the focus on performance.

Morris stepping is distinctively different from other dance traditions. There is lots of leaping and large, vigorous arm movements with hankies or sticks. In moving to Zoom, very little about each dancer's movements has changed. There is more emphasis on the arms and whole body movements which show clearly on Zoom, while the subtleties of the foot movements are largely invisible. Much of the timing precision has fallen away as Zoom lag makes synchronizing to the beat impossible. Keeping the traditional stepping is important however, even when it can't be seen, as it affects how the dancer moves.

Most of our dances share a common set of figures, that is, the patterns we move through across the floor. None of these worked on Zoom. Some failed because they weren't distinct: a half hands figure passing beside the opposite dancer looks identical to a back to back around the opposite dancer when there is no opposite dancer. Some failed because they required interactions that weren't there: a circle of six with only one dancer doesn't read as a circle at all. Zoom space is different from physical space. Our squares have sides, corners, closer and farther, inside or outside, and not much else. We adapted our figures to work within these dimensions: foot up goes towards the camera and away, half hands goes to one side then the other, back to back goes to the corners, cross over goes out of the frame (off camera) then back on. and rounds turn on the spot. The resulting figures are close to their originals but distinctive, visually interesting, and suited to the virtual space in which we dance.

ABOVE: *Berkeley Morris performs the dance "Banks of the Zee," their variant of the Fieldtown dance "Banks of the Dee." Screenshot by Randall Cayford.*

The most challenging element to work out was interactions between the dancers trapped in their squares. In morris, we are dancing together, not as individuals. We clash sticks or cross to each other's positions or weave in and out around each other, and these interactions are fundamental to what makes morris dance. On Zoom, the available ways to interact are completely different. While patterns like heys and circles and back to backs are unavailable, the Zoom grid gives new possibilities, such as rows, columns, and diagonals, left and right sides, tops

and bottoms, and progressions around the screen. We can't clash sticks, but we can work with sticking up and down or to the corners or the sides, giving a visual inter-action with neighboring dancers.

Zoom required many changes to the dance choreography. The audience of a Zoom performance is always in front, so side and back movements had to change. Quick step sequences or fast changes of direction easily become visual chaos, so we do longer sequences with more repetition. Contrasting stillness with movement is very effective, so we split choruses where some dancers move while the rest are still, and then switch. Blocks of dancers moving together are visually stronger, so corner interactions changed to row or column or neighbor interactions. These interactions demand a lot from the dancers, requiring them to know where on the screen they appear and to adjust directions based on that position, with very little feedback. We place dancers by controlling the order in which people turn on their cameras, but each dancer has to translate between the position they appear to be on the screen and the position the audience sees them in.

And what the audience sees is important. Berkeley Morris is a performing team. From the outset, we intended to perform and needed a form that worked for an audience. By the first of May, we had a set of dances and a scripted show for dancing the sun up on May Day—19 dancers and seven musicians, connected over Zoom and live-streamed to YouTube. We have continued to perform since.

Laid out like this makes it sound like we had a plan at the start. We didn't. As we danced each week, we discovered things we didn't like or things that we missed or things that seemed exciting. So we added a bit here and a bit there and discarded bits when we discovered better bits. Each week we continue to explore what's possible in this new medium. The result is not morris as we knew it, but it is still morris.

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