

Back Home in the Theater: Christopher K. Morgan & Artists Come Together for Their In-Person Dance Place Residency

By Arielle Ostry

The moment was bittersweet: Seeing Christopher K. Morgan & Artists (CKM&A) back in its home theater, but via Zoom. It has been more than a year since the world changed; since Dance Place postponed its season in the interest of public safety and we all took a long and unwelcome break from live performance. But getting a glimpse of Morgan's masked face through the pixelated feed of a single Zoom square, and seeing his dancers rehearse their reworked solos, it felt like coming home.

I have watched many memorable dance performances grace the Dance Place stage over the past four years that I've lived and studied in the District, from Rosie Herrera's "Make Believe," featuring a dancing inflatable bounce house, to Nancy Havlik's "A Few Worlds," incorporating live music and original partnering. Observing Morgan's dancers inhabit the intimate black box stage inspired an overwhelming sense of nostalgia for me as a viewer. It reminded me of what was before, and at the same time presented what will be the future -- the light at the end of this dark tunnel, if you will.

Morgan and his troupe of technically stunning and genuinely expressive dancers (three showed excerpts at the virtual studio visit I attended) participated in an in-person residency at Dance Place in mid-April 2021, picking up where they left off in developing the evening-length work "Native Intelligence / Innate Intelligence," which was originally scheduled to premiere a year earlier, in May 2020.

"The past week has been the first time we have been able to gather and rehearse in person," Morgan said, summing up the residency experience at the virtual studio visit. "We are really happy to be working at Dance Place." The company is currently celebrating its tenth anniversary, marking a decade of collaborative practice that has birthed a range of culturally relevant, virtuosic works like "In The Cold Room," a dynamic trio focusing on the contrast between light and dark, isolation and connection; or "Pōhaku" a theater piece that explores Morgan's Native Hawaiian background, combining his experience with hula and modern dance.

"Native Intelligence / Innate Intelligence," following some of the same through lines that appear to have inspired "Pōhaku," examines what it means to be native, digging into the concept of belonging somewhere, and how ancestry and legacy impact an individual's personal identity and present moment. Nativity, a universal concept, posits that we all come from somewhere. We belong to a lineage that informs who we are, how we live, and the place we consider home. Nonetheless, individuals can have varied experiences understanding and exploring this side of

the human consciousness, and Morgan's work acknowledges this through contributions of the dancers who were involved in developing this distinctly personal dance.

"The piece looks at identity: where we are from, heritage, ancestry, lineage," Morgan said. "[It] interrogates native identity, all of our multi-hyphenated identities, and how they weave together into the complexities of our current realities." A highlight of the work is its incredible set design, featuring a hanging DNA replica sculpted by Cherokee artist Brenda Mallory. Well known for working with repurposed materials, she creates captivating, three dimensional installations that imply broken and repaired links to culture and tradition. Her artistic philosophy lends itself well to Morgan's vision for the dance. According to the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation, Mallory has said, "I try to make work that alludes to the idea of loss, hope, and resiliency."

When introducing the set and its creator, Morgan revealed how they originally connected through their Native identities: "I met Brenda through the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation at a gathering that they hosted in Portland in 2016." This partnership has given birth to both a set and choreography that is conducive to evaluating and reflecting on the role that cultural identity plays in a person's everyday life. Her twisting helix suspended overhead sets the environment for performance. Yet this hanging helix also commands its own attention, hinting at the main themes of the dance while making its own artistic statement. Backstage hands manipulate it while transitioning into different scenes, referencing how outside forces can impact one's identity.

The sculpture casts clear-cut shadows onto the stage, especially when projections by Kelly Colburn illuminate the floor in hues of blue or the stark black and white of an urban crosswalk. These shadows provide a maze-like environment that the dancers navigate through, showcasing a postmodern discipline in the way they move to and from the floor, or the manner in which they face the audience head on, candidly speaking about moments from their past.

Connecting to Native Hawaiian Identity

Although Morgan grew up immersed in his native background through his extended family, he never had the opportunity to live on the island of Hawai'i, the land of his ancestors. Instead, he has lived on the continental United States for the majority of his life. "That has created this deep sense of separation and isolation that has overshadowed a large part of my life," he said in the pitch for constructing this work. "The more I move through the world, I meet people who feel similarly."

Morgan's identity as a Native Hawaiian has become a pillar of his Western dance practice, especially in recent years. "Pōhaku" (meaning stone in Native Hawaiian) was the first work he made combining mele (Hawaiian music) and hula (Hawaiian dance) into his contemporary dance

practice. It premiered at Dance Place in 2016. According to Morgan, the background research that went into investigating his identity and preparing this dance work took almost a decade.

“It began a process of re-indigenizing my artistic practices, embracing and integrating my multiple racial and ethnic identities, learning more about my native culture, while connecting me to broader communities of native artists and adding new foci to my advocacy work,” he said about this creative process.

The connections he made to his roots through past work became fully apparent in the intention and process of creating “Native Intelligence / Innate Intelligence.” The company participated in lei making as part of the virtual element of this residency, and Morgan performs a Hawaiian chant in the piece. Chanting is just one segment of the spoken word expressed in the work, complementing the dancers’ movement and emphasizing the diversity of the ensemble’s identities.

Making Choreography COVID-friendly

Prior to the pandemic, “Native Intelligence / Innate Intelligence” looked very different. It was far along in its development by early 2020, involving a great deal of contact and interaction between performers. “This piece was just over two months away from its premiere when the pandemic shut everything down,” Morgan said. “It had, once upon a time and may again in the future, include a lot of partnering and ensemble work.” But with the COVID-19 pandemic, Morgan noted, it became clear early on that he would have to get comfortable “letting go of the stuff [we] had made and embrace the new.” With everyone forced apart, the choreographer adapted the dance to prevailing health and safety restrictions to keep company members healthy. In response, he turned to solos while working in quarantine.

“Each performer has a strand in the piece based around their own identities,” he said. “So, as I started to think about how to work safely in the pandemic, working with them on solos became a good way for us to reconnect.”

Although the work looks different than his initial vision, the pandemic-induced changes seem to bolster it. The new solos highlight a deeply individual element to the concept of identity. The excerpts I witnessed incorporated movement that was both fluid and repetitive, whirling in a cycle of constant motion. Circles and spiraling appear as common movement motifs in the work, alluding to the roundabout ways that ancestry and tradition can affect an individual.

Additionally, the approach Morgan takes to involve the soloists within the space makes the dancers appear like ships passing in the night, not completely aware of each other’s presence, but nonetheless they persist in their own existence. This element of the choreography provides the

opportunity for deeper reflection on how ignorance and the simple act of not knowing impacts how we interact with and treat one another's cultural identities.

Accepting Limits of the Zoom Space

While it was refreshing to see dancers on a stage, experiencing the virtual studio session made me more impatient to see this work live. It reminded me of what I have been missing as a dance viewer over the past year, and made me long for when we will be able to see performances live and in-person once again. Hopefully, this reality is not too far off.

In any sort of digital viewing experience (especially over Zoom), the details of a performance can often get lost. Intricacies of the woven sculpture of words and dance are not fully realized; the words — spoken eloquently and confidently by performers — soften and fade into the ambient buzz of the theater, which often overpowers the computer's microphone. While this residency is a hopeful peek at what can and will soon be, watching live work online leaves much to be desired.

Looking to the future, the live, in-person premiere of "Native Intelligence / Innate Intelligence" has been tentatively set for May 2022 at the Maui Arts and Cultural Center in Kahului, Hawai'i. But overall, the piece's future, and where it might tour, will ultimately be determined by how the performing arts climate evolves during the coming year. "Everyone is recalibrating their work now with over a year of delays," Morgan said. In all, the company's process and enthusiastic participation throughout its April residency shows that Morgan and his dancers continue moving forward as an ensemble, while coming back home to the theater.

Regardless of when the piece eventually premieres, its topical significance and inquiry is timeless, poking at a subject that we are constantly scrutinizing and reevaluating: What role does our cultural background play in our lives and how can we find connection and empathy for others through these varied histories and experiences?

Arielle Ostry is a writer and dancer originally from Green Brook, N.J., graduating this spring from The George Washington University with a degree in dance as well as journalism and mass communication. She has written reviews for danceviewtimes.com and DC Theatre Scene, covering dance performances in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. She has also interned at the Kennedy Center in editorial communications and worked for the communications team at the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design. She currently works as an assistant editor for [NYOTA Magazine](https://nyota.com), a quarterly publication featuring young, up-and-coming stars in the entertainment industry.