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[JOURNAL] Nancy Umanoff, Executive Director of Mark Morris Dance Group

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Submitted by Adrienne Bryant

[Nancy Umanoff]

AB: The Mark Morris Dance Group spent 1989-1991 as the resident company of the Theatre de la Monnaie in Brussels. Would you ever consider moving the company again?

NU: In 1987 Mark Morris was invited to become the Director of Dance at the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels. Several American choreographers have been given the opportunity to move to Europe to take over an existing company or to create a new one but none had relocated their entire company. In an unprecedented move, the Mark Morris Dance Group -dancers and staff- moved to Belgium in 1988. It was truly an offer we couldn't refuse - full year salaries, health insurance, vacation pay, a full time masseuse and production team, access to the beautiful baroque national opera house (and any other Belgian theater of our choosing), live music (all of the time) provided by the Monnaie orchestra and chorus, virtually unlimited production budgets and a home with numerous studios. We were given everything that money could buy. The 'Belgian Years (1988-1991)' were a very prolific time for Mark, resulting in 12 major works - most of which would never have been created without the substantial resources of the Belgian government.

However, in the theater we lacked a real connection with the audience and in our daily lives we were missing a sense of belonging, an acceptance by the local community. We would remain outsiders for the 3 1/2 years that we lived there. The Belgians never embraced the company or Mark's work.

Upon returning to the United States we endeavored to recreate everything that was "good" about the Belgian Years. In 1996 we formed the MMDG Music Ensemble and committed to live music at all performances. In 2001 we opened the Mark Morris Dance Center in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, which not only serves as a home for the Mark Morris Dance Group, but houses rehearsal space for the dance community, outreach programs for local children, as well as a school offering dance classes to students of all ages. We have set down roots and have become an integral part of our community. It is unlikely that we would move again - unless of course, we got an offer we couldn't refuse.

AB: Dance organizations are chronically under-funded, you have to be away on the road for weeks at a time, and you work incredibly long hours. Why do you stay?

NU: Few people are fortunate enough to make their living doing what they love to do. I'm lucky enough to be one of them. While the challenges are many, the rewards are great.

I am constantly surrounded by creative people in an exciting environment. I get to work with amazing artists and organizations: Mark Morris, Yo-Yo Ma, Emanuel Ax, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Isaac Mizrahi, London Symphony Orchestra, The Metropolitan Opera, to name just a few. And I get to see a lot of great shows.

The Dance Center is also an incredibly inspiring place teeming with kids, seniors, aspiring professionals, local residents and those afflicted with Parkinson's Disease and other movement disorders all experiencing the joy of dancing and singing.

AB: Do you think that there are major differences in arts professionals just entering the field now compared to those who have been around for a while?

NU: Young arts professionals - young people in general, I think - are smarter, tougher and more demanding than previous generations. They want to know how the job at your organization will help them get to the next level in their career. They ask more questions at interviews, have greater expectations of you providing mentoring, professional development and they rarely stay for more than 2 or 3 years. These emerging leaders are paving the shortest and most efficient path to the top.

AB: What qualities do you look for when hiring a new employee?

NU: Passion, Experience, Initiative, Strong verbal and written communication skill