

MARK BURRELL: EMBRACING, TEACHING THE MAGIC OF THE STAGE

[f SHARE](#)[TWEET](#)[g+ SHARE](#)

“And then it happened. Suddenly, shamelessly and without warning, as it must in all musical comedies, they were struck by ... a love song.”

That’s a line from the Tony Award-winning show “Pippin,” which will be in our fair city Feb. 23-28. Our profile this week is a fellow who’s been struck by all sorts of music: dancer and choreographer Mark Burrell. If I included his entire résumé, there wouldn’t be any space left for the interview, but the highlights are, he’s been the assistant choreographer for Radio City Music Hall’s “Christmas Spectacular”

for the past 10 years. His dancing has taken him around the world, from Japan to Zambia. He's been featured in films, appeared in shows such as "Cats" and "Beauty and the Beast" and has been on the "Late Show with David Letterman" and "Conan." He's been a guest artist with too many companies to mention and is a teacher at his alma mater, the Juilliard School in New York City.

His roles in this production of "Pippin" are swing, assistant choreographer, dance captain and understudy.

PGN: You've been a busy thespian.

MB: Yes, I've been very lucky. It's a lot of stress and a lot of work but also a lot of fun. It's what I love to do.

PGN: Your bio says you have a "motivating yet demanding" style of teaching. What does that mean? Are you the "Dance Mom" type?

MB: Oh no, I would not say I'm the "Dance Mom" type; I deal with them on a daily basis, and no. What I would say is that my motivating style is inspirational based. It's trying to cultivate and change people's perspective on what they can do. A lot of people come to me saying, "I'm a singer or actor, I can't do this" and I challenge them and say, "You know what? You just haven't had a good dance teacher. Let me do what I do." And I find a common language instead of speaking in technical dance terms and make it fun. But I let them know it's work too. So many people want to get into the business without doing the work. There's a generation of entitlement that I just can't get with. I have worked so hard to achieve what I have. You have to work, you have to put in the time and sweat. But that's what makes it so rewarding.

PGN: I wonder if some of it comes from these competition shows where someone with a good voice can go from working in a pizza shop to having a record deal without all the work in between.

MB: I'd say yes; though on the other hand, these shows have offered opportunities to people including myself and I love the idea that they've really brought dance and music into people's homes. Shows like "Grease" and "The Wiz Live" are great too. Maybe they're not done to perfection, but who cares? You're very exposed doing live TV like that, but the mistakes are part of what makes it exciting and special. It's taking us back to the '40s and '50s when you saw most musicals on screen. That's how people like Busby Berkeley got his point of view across. We don't get to see that anymore.

PGN: Were you a type-A kid? And how did that manifest itself?

MB: [Laughs] Without a doubt. I was a control freak then and I still am. I would hold the neighborhood beauty pageant on the deck in our backyard. I was the one who picked out your outfit, choreographed your routine and told you how to do your hair. And I sold the tickets.

PGN: Any siblings?

MB: I have an older brother. He's three years older than I and the total opposite. My parents were fortunate in that they got one from each column: He was the soccer player and golfer, I was the creative one. I now have three nephews that I adore. My partner and I have been together for 17 years and we are Uncle Mark and Uncle Jason to them. I have a very, very supportive family, from the time I came out. Both of my parents were school teachers for 37 years: my dad high-school biology, my mom first grade.

PGN: Who was the first person you told you were gay?

MB: I told my dance partner, Sarah Smith. I was 16 and we were having a sleepover the night before a big competition. Then I told my brother, in his red car on our way to Dairy Queen. And then I told my mother as soon as we got home.

PGN: I guess Dairy Queen was a fitting spot.

MB: Hilarious! Looking back, I was very lucky: I grew up in Michigan, which was not a very accepting state. It's still challenging. During this tour, I got to go to Detroit and spent time with an acquaintance from high school. He told me that in school he'd wanted to be part of the high-school musical but wasn't a dancer ... at all. But I'd taken time, after school or in the morning before class, to teach him how to tap dance so he could be a part of the show. He said that it made all the difference in the world to him. He's now a big-time lawyer but a huge arts supporter because of that. It was so nice to reconnect with him on this tour. I feel like I've come full-circle.

PGN: That's lovely. You obviously made an impression.

MB: Well, people don't take time to teach each other. It's like "Oh, you can't dance? Well then you can work on the set." But he was a kid who wanted to sing and dance and he seemed like a nice guy. So I taught him what I knew.

PGN: You've been dancing since you were young ...

MB: Since I was 7-and-a-half.

PGN: What was the first style you learned professionally?

MB: Tap and jazz. I learned tap at Sherry Lee Dunkanson's School of Dance in the basement of her home. I didn't want to be the only guy so I recruited my best friend, who was a total jock — captain of the football team, captain of the track team — and he tapped and jazzed and was in recitals and everybody came to see us. It was no big deal to anybody that I was a dancer. I got teased on occasion, but with the biggest jock in school having my back, it didn't happen much. We're still best friends to this day.

PGN: What was it and how old were you when you went on your first national tour?

MB: It was “Fosse,” and I was 19. It was overwhelming. I was attending Juilliard and I called in sick to class because I’d heard they were auditioning for the national tour. I loved Fosse’s work and had studied it for years. I was like, They’re doing a whole show based on his work? I want to try it. Why can’t I try? So I went down and auditioned, did about three dance combinations, made it all the way to the end and then they said, “OK, now do your song.” Wait, what? I don’t know how to sing! I had a little song I’d done at school so I sang that, all nervous as could be. They asked me to try to relax and sing it again so I did, sounding just as bad but somehow I got a call three days later offering me the swing role on the show. So not only was I going to be doing my first Broadway tour, I was going to have to learn every male part! It was completely daunting but I was like, You know what? This is my chance. So I got a leave of absence from school and went on the road for two-and-a-half years and couldn’t have been happier. I saw the country, the world on someone else’s dollar, doing what I’d always wanted to do.

PGN: Since you’ve traveled the world, where would you live if you were banished from the states?

MB: I’d probably say Israel. I spent three weeks there doing “So You Think You Can Dance” and it’s just magical. The culture was phenomenal and the food was fantastic. I loved that everyone stopped for coffee at 4 p.m. no matter what you were doing. It was crazy, like “OK, the whole entire country is having coffee together,” and then just as sudden, everything reconvened. It was really clean and there was a lot of historical energy in the air. I’d give it a try.

PGN: Something that you’ve kept from a show?

MB: I kept the bowler hat from “Fosse.” But [legendary choreographer] Chet Walker gave me the original bowler hat that he and Mr. Fosse used. It’s very special.

PGN: The arts are so important; what does dance mean to you?

MB: Dance and the arts are life. There's no separation in my opinion. People have creative voices, and there's nothing better than being able to express yourself in all aspects: your voice, your expressions and physicality. It's a never-ending journey of self-exploration. Through dance, you can help change people's perspectives. In times of war and discord and brutality, it's our jobs as artists to highlight it or take people away from it ... give them an escape.

PGN: Someone whom you've affected as a teacher or dancer?

MB: Actually in this show, the very first swing that we hired was someone whose ability was a little questionable to me when she first came in. She came right from academia and was very young, no experience. I remember sitting her down on her third day trying to impart on her the spirit of Fosse's dancing. She looked at me and said, "I've never been allowed to be free like this. Everyone has always told me what to do. You're the first to ask me to be me while I do it." I said, "But look at you, and how your body moves! Don't you just love what you see?" She started crying and said, "I've never been told how wonderful I am, only what steps to do and what I'm not doing right." She went on to tell me that she always wanted to dance but that her mother never wanted her to do it, that her school put limits on her and told her, at most, she'd be a good ensemble dancer. I told her, "I think you're going to be a star, baby." She's still with the show and she's one of the best female swings I've seen in 20 years. She can sing and dance circles around most of the girls and does it with a smile on her face and the spirit of wonder. It's awesome. I love watching her and the confidence she's found. She owns the world now.

PGN: A sketchy moment from your life as a dancer?

MB: I was offered a small industrial job, and when I showed up for the first day of rehearsal it wasn't anything like what we were promised. We thought it was a TV shoot for a department store but they wanted us to dance in a nightclub up on the bar. There were six dancers hired and we all left.

PGN: I didn't even realize all the opportunities for dancers until I read your bio. Explain how/why do you danced for Tupperware?

MB: We do all sorts of corporate events where we schlub for a new week, learning little routines to perform at their big world conferences. For Tupperware, they were introducing a new product with a "Pop and Lock" lid. So we learned several numbers introducing the Tupperware and did a '70s disco/hip-hop routine that incorporated some pop-and-lock dancing. It was really clever.

PGN: You teach dance to a variety of groups, from the Rockettes to Barbara Ingram School of the Arts. What are the differences between teaching adults and kids?

MB: With kids, I love that they're still so hungry for information; they want to learn and I love feeding a hungry student. It takes a lot of patience and I have to remind myself, They can't get better until you get better, Mark. If they're not learning, it's on my head. The nice thing about working with professionals is that most of them are comfortable with what they do, so they're willing to try new things. As long as they look good! It's all about negotiation.

PGN: Tell me about "Dancing with the Stars."

MB: Yes, Susan Lucci has been a client of mine for years. I worked with her doing her one-woman show. She travels and does a lot of casino gigs, song and dance. So I worked with her, did pre-show training and while she was traveling. I also worked with Cameron Mathison. You create a small foundation in a short time and send them out to California. It's pretty cool to watch them flourish once they get there.

PGN: Is that a trade secret that they get training ahead of time?

MB: No, not at all. They all get a little boot camp ahead of time to learn the essence of ballroom dance so they're not clueless when they start. But they do have to learn all that choreography on the spot each week. That's not easy for someone who's not a dancer.

PGN: Why do you think it's such a life-changing experience for so many celebs?

MB: Dancers are more in tune with their bodies than any other humans. I think that's what's rewarding and what people see as they watch the show. You develop a connection with your body you didn't have before and it's physically rewarding but also mentally and spiritually rewarding. I've had the privilege of working with a lot of women of maturity for the role of Bertha and they all say they're in the best shape of their lives because of the show. Right now we have Adrienne Barbeau, who's 70 and who gets on the trapeze each night and executes it exquisitely. All the women come at it with such open spirits and an open light for change. When I first met Annie Potts, she was walking with a cane after a horrible car accident, but when she got on that trapeze you wouldn't have known a thing was wrong, ever. She said, "Mark, when I get up there I'm free. I don't feel an ounce of pain." It's magical.

PGN: I don't know how dancers do it. I see people at auditions and the choreographer says, "OK, jump, turn, ball kick change ..." and then does about 20 different steps and they seem to get it right away. You must need a good memory.

MB: Yes! There are some people who are good in the classroom where there's structure but are terrible at auditioning because they never learned just what you're speaking about. It's actually a skill that you need to craft. When I'm teaching, I try to make sure that my students learn the art of getting your mind to fire and sync quickly like that. I happen to be pretty good at it. To this day, I could do the entire "Radio City Christmas" show with each girl's part for you if needed.

PGN: Are you good at Simon and concentration games?

MB: [Laughs] I am! But I'm best at Cards for Humanity!

PGN: "Pippin" is one of those shows that seems to keep reviving every few years. What makes it so engaging?

MB: I think it's an important show because it asks the question, How far would you go? How much would you risk to be extraordinary? And what does being extraordinary mean to you? I think everybody who comes to the show, whether they're a child or an adult, walks away able to answer that question. And it's pretty amazing that it's done through such a spectacle of a show. The show has a huge diversity of movements, acrobatics, terrific acting and artistry and some of the finest dancing ever seen on stage in the Fosse style of dance.

PGN: And jazz hands?

MB: [Laughs] Yeah, you'll see a lot of them. But really the excitement of jazz hands is all about the tension ... the tension of life and existence all live in jazz hands.

“Pippin” takes the stage at the Academy of Music Feb. 23-28. For more information or tickets, visit www.kimmelcenter.org.
