(614)

JAN 2016 | FREE
ISSUE 83

THE INTERVIEW ISSUE

ANDREW GINTHER | PIPER KERMAN | WILL SHIVELY | IAN JAMES
CATIE RANDAZZO | DOMINIQUE LARUE | STEPHANIE ROND
CABOT REA | MICHAEL MORRIS | JOHN DAUGHERTY

MICHAEL J. MORRIS

Professor of Dance/
Transgender Activist

With LAURA DACHENBACH

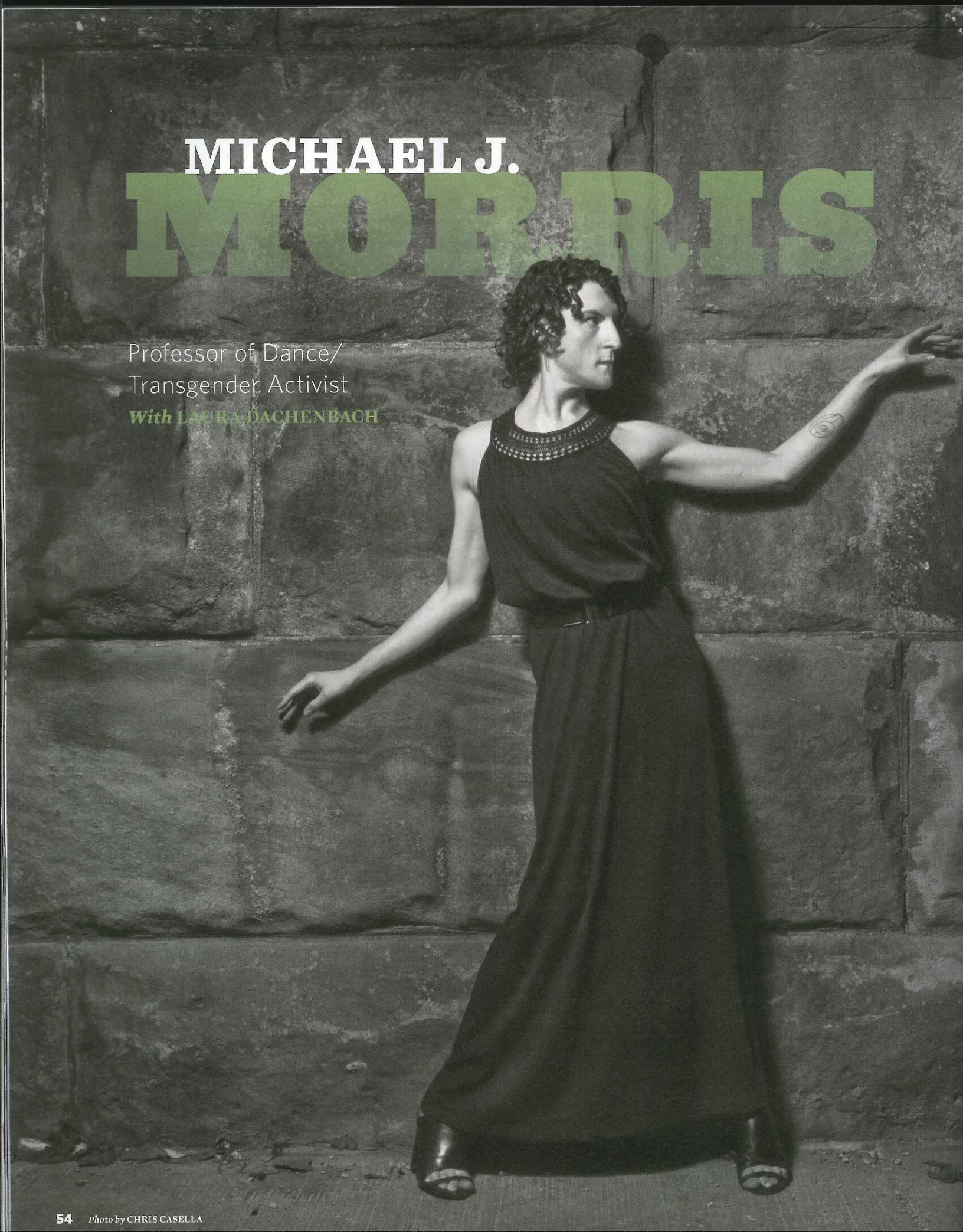

 Photo by CHRIS CASELLA

I saw my first transgender person on a TV talk show. Perhaps on Phil Donahue or maybe Sally Jesse Raphael, as she tried to get attention during sweeps. Three trans women and a trans man all spoke about their experiences using cross-sex hormone therapy to enhance their gender identities, and allowed us, the viewing public, to evaluate the results. This is how I, along with much of America, learned about the transgender narrative: as men wanting to be women or women wanting to be men, all of them willing to physically and hormonally change their bodies to achieve that goal.

Now the trans narrative itself is beginning to shift, or at least the public understanding of it, thanks to people like Michael J. Morris, a visiting professor of dance at Denison University and an activist for transgender causes. Morris and others push for wider recognition and acceptance of individuals who upend, or "queer," the very concepts of being male or female. These people do not always seek to alter their bodies, although the gender presentation of their clothing, makeup, or movement may be ambiguous. They live (or as some might say, they perform) their genders outside of this binary altogether.

Talking about gender nonconformity is difficult, not least of all because our language lacks adequate vocabulary and easy ways to discuss it. During our conversation, Morris bemoaned the difficulty of writing professional bios; Morris's preferred third-person singular pronouns are "they," "their," and "them," as those words don't specify gender. To Morris, the repetition of a last name ad nauseam was clunky, but to the eyes and ears of mainstream culture, "they" in reference to a single person can be just as awkward, as I quickly found when I sat down to write. Born as a conjoined twin, Morris and their brother grew up in a Christian home in Louisiana, still inseparable until the two were led to different colleges, and eventually, different gender identities. Morris identifies as genderqueer/non-binary while their twin, now living in Chicago, identifies as queer/gay.

Morris moves through the eclectic worlds of yoga, queer porn, and burlesque, and they became a transgender activist through art and academia, for which Morris has won several teaching awards. Their goals: to use both words and bodies to create more spaces and more categories for difference, and as a result, to make life more livable for everyone.

On the difficulty of the conversation: The majority of my students are not trans or genderqueer...and so then when we start talking about gender as a role that you're assigned, that you perform, a lot of them feel some distance from that, like, "No, I just am this. I am a woman. I am a man." And then I ask them...if they've ever felt anxious or worried that they weren't doing it right. Like a bunch of girls getting ready [to] go out on a Friday night and worried that they're not going to be pretty enough, or worried that they're not going to look right. And that feeling of, "I'm not doing it right," for me is an indication that none of us are fully identical with these categories. Once we recognize that we're all approximating something more or less—[then] what if we gave ourselves more options for what we're trying to be in the world?

People really struggle with words. I was at a workshop with two really, really lovely people and spent three hours dancing with them, and both of them are extremely supportive individuals. Both of them called me "he" multiple times, and I gently reminded them, "Oh, my preferred gender pronouns are 'they,' 'them,' 'their,'" and they're like, "Oh right, right. I'm so sorry." And I'm like, "It's fine. Let's just keep moving." And there's this sense of social trauma. The way I try to address it with people is I think of this as a big group project that we're all working on together

Continued on page 72

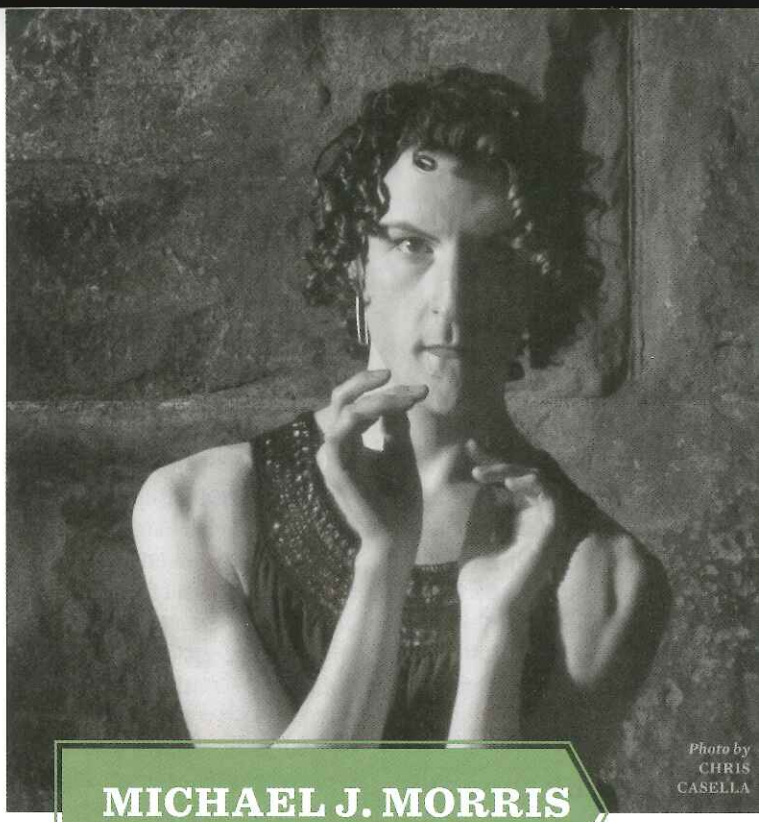

Photo by CHRIS CASELLA

MICHAEL J. MORRIS

Continued from page 54

and we're all doing the best we can.

And if they can trust that I'm not going to be horribly offended every time they say words that are not the words that I prefer, then I'm going to trust that they can receive gentle reminders about what I do prefer.

On the language of gender fluidity: The umbrella terms have shifted a lot during the last 20 years. Right now "trans" as a prefix is functioning as an umbrella term in a lot of parts of the country. When I visit New York or San Francisco it's very easy for someone to say, "I'm trans," and for people to understand that in a broad way, whereas I think that a lot of the spaces that I move through in Columbus, if someone identifies as trans, the general assumption is that you're transsexual—that you are pursuing medical treatment in order to transition to an opposite sex. So genderqueer, specifically for me, is a way of signaling to people, "You may not know what my gender is." Whenever I identify as genderqueer, most people... [have the] response, "I don't know what that means. Can you explain that to me?" And that's exactly the conversation I want to have.

On the shifting transgender experience: I think that I probably narrate the transgender experience differently than a lot of people who are in the public eye right now. I mean, a lot of the language that we hear from people like Caitlyn Jenner or Carmen Carrera or Laverne Cox—that is a very popular narrative of the transgender experience, like, "I had the wrong body. I've always felt like I was something else." So my view of the transgender experience... it's very much about making a self. I'm less interested in narratives about trying to become "who I always was" because that child I was was who I was. But now any of us can become something other than [what] we were. I don't want to imply radical flexibility in that—it's not that we can be or become anything we want to because—as many people who experience the medicalization of transsexuality or transgenderism know—in fact it can be quite hard to become something that you want to be. I like my body as it is; I've never felt any sort of dysphoria with my body. My break with the role I had been assigned was around meaning. And I, and other

people, I think, are interested in saying, "Maybe my body doesn't mean what you think it means."

On the difficulties of expectations and the media representation of transgenderism: Someone like me, I'm not trying to pass as anything. I'm really comfortable with that. But what about kids who don't understand that to be an option, and all they get shown in the media are these really pretty women who pass? If you only see women who look a certain way, whether they are trans or not, then that's the only possibility. Like, why aren't there more presentations of trans women who don't get facial feminization surgery or trans women who have really broad shoulders and large hands? The majority of the world [doesn't] have access to those kind of resources [for reconstructive surgery]. And more importantly, why are we telling the story in such a way that they need those resources? What if someone can identify as a woman or a man or otherwise, and look however they look, and that's ok?

On learning to understand gender presentation: I teach a lot of students who don't have a background in dance. So whenever we start watching dances and trying to talk about them, they don't know what to say. No one's ever taught them how to make sense of a dance. They know what they feel, but it's not talking about the dance, it's talking about themselves. It takes time, to start giving them different movement analysis frameworks to start developing the skills for making meaning of what they're looking at. So in a way that's analogous to giving people the tools to make meaning from [gender presentations] they previously saw as meaningless or confusing or enigmatic.

On dance and choreography: I am a dancer, but I'm also someone who teaches dance, but I'm also primarily a dance-maker. I choreograph work. I think dancing and making choreography are the ways I figure out the world. It's the way I ask questions about the world. When there's something I don't understand, I bring it back to bodies, because that's how we lived it in the first place. There is no lived experience without our bodies...and that's at the heart of dance. Dance is always, whatever else it is, it is always an experiment in the body. We are always asking questions about what can a body do and how can a body live and how can a body move. As a choreographer, it's also the way I create experiences for other people too. When I make a dance and I put it out in the world for other people to view and for other people to perform, then that's part of their lived experience as well.

On academia and teaching: I thrive in academia. As committed as I am to the body and to movement, words come really easily to me—putting words together, thinking complex thoughts in words...that's academia. And then I've always been drawn to teaching. There's something remarkable about giving people the opportunity to know more than they did when they came in the room—which is not the same thing as telling them what to know, or what to think, but giving them the opportunity to think, to think critically, to think differently, to think from another perspective. I love that. Frankly, I'm incredibly privileged to be where I am as far as my education—landing a job literally the month after I graduated...It doesn't always go this way.

On living as non-binary in a world that insists upon categorization: There's definitely not easy answers to any of this. I always try to remind myself that this is a world that we've made this way. None of it had to be this way. If we recognize that it didn't have to be this way, then what are the things we need to be evaluating to make sure more people can live? ■