

To dance courage: Ballet Austin's Stephen Mills creates his most personal work yet

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Ballet Austin dancers rehearse "Exit Wounds," a new work by the company's artistic director Stephen Mills. All photos by Anne Marie Bloodgood.

As a maker of dance, Ballet Austin artistic director Stephen Mills is no stranger to tackling enormous and difficult topics.

“Exit Wounds” runs April 6-8 at the Long Center. See balletaustin.org

In 2005 Mills confronted the legacy of hate and genocide in “Light /The Holocaust & Humanity Project,” a ballet of uncommon poignancy. Ballet Austin toured the production internationally to Israel a few years after its premiere and “Light” continues to be presented by other ballet companies nationally.

Now, with “Exit Wounds” Mills presents a highly personal ballet that explores what it is to face fear and yet choose courage.

“I think that as an artist who works in a field that is considered to be a little more buttoned up than say modern dance, I am interested in the way that this art form can find more relevance in our day-to-day lives,” Mills has said.

Presented April 6-8 at the Long Center, “Exit Wounds” is a full-length abstract work portrayed in three chapters. Each is rooted in an experience from Mills’ life — episodes which resonated because of the bravery Mills saw in people as they experience enormous despair.Advertisement



While creating “Exit Wounds” Mills kept a quote by Winston Churchill in mind: “Fear is a reaction, courage is a decision.”

Mills answered questions via e-mail about his latest work.

Sightlines: The title “Exit Wounds,” at first impression, seems like a violent phrase. What was your decision in using it for this ballet?

Stephen Mills: The term 'exit wounds' does have a violent connotation. After the death of my mother I started to grapple more with mortality and began to think about the ways in which people enter our lives, what they give to us and the lessons they teach. But I also started to think about the exit wounds people leave in our hearts and souls when they pass. Although, a void or injury is left behind there is also beauty, learning and love.

S: You chose three specific experiences on which you built "Exit Wounds": your mother's passing, the #MeToo movement and the early days of the AIDS crisis in 1980s. Can you elaborate a little bit more about each of those and what is the connecting thread between them?

SM: The stories are certainly related to three specific episodes of loss I've encountered in my life. But the most important aspect of the work is the concept of finding courage in the face of fear. These are stories where I had the opportunity to witness courageous acts so profound that my concepts of life, death and love were forever altered.

The section "Fields" is related to my mother and the way she faced her fear of death and bravely stepped to the other side. "Four Mortal Men" is a work about the ways in which some of my friends faced homophobia and the added bigoted stigmatism of being stricken with AIDS. And "Truth Rescued by Time" is related to the courage we've all seen displayed by the women in the #MeToo movement who have come forward, in spite of ridicule and indifference, to call out the crimes of their perpetrators.



Stephen Mills, far left, working with Ballet Austin dancers in rehearsal.

S: As “Exit Wounds” is a non-narrative contemporary ballet, how would you describe the movement vocabulary you created for this dance exploration about transcendence and courage?

SM: Well, the movement creation process has been very interesting. I always look for new ways to challenge myself to look at movement generation in different ways. The vocabulary is difficult to describe but I would say it is contemporary in nature and very grounded. In some instances the dance is sweet, in others sensual. Sometimes the work is belligerent and sometimes angry.

S: You’re collaborating with video artist and former Ballet Austin dancer Jordan Moser, who has created short films that play before each of the ballet’s three sections. What do the films bring to the dance and what was your decision to include film?

SM: I truly enjoyed working with Jordan while he was a dancer with the company. As a film maker he has displayed a real talent for storytelling. He has very sensitively given life to my three stories in abstract, yet tender ways. “Exit Wounds” will be performed without intermission so the films will act as bridges from one story to the next. Our goal was, obviously to tell the story, but to show the ways in which courage figured prominently.



Ballet Austin dancer Ashley Lynn Sherman rehearses.

S: The music for “Exit Wounds” includes a new piece by longtime collaborator Graham Reynolds, Debussy and The National’s Bryce Dessner. Can you describe the musical palette of “Exit Wounds?”

SM: The musical topography runs the gamut from Debussy¹s impressionistic music, to the driving and pulsing work of Bryce Dessner to a new score by Graham Reynolds that is achingly beautiful. I believe I’ve chosen music that hits every angle and emotion.

S: Your choreographic catalog includes ballets on potent emotional subjects, specifically “Light, The Holocaust Project.” How does “Exit Wounds” fit in to that trajectory of your dance making?

SM: “Exit Wounds” is a work I would place within a social justice context. Much like LIGHT it revolves around stories of inspiration and determination. I find it satisfying to work on projects that have a social relevance. Although there’s certainly relevance in simple beauty, there¹s something very gratifying about having the ability to use art to convene conversation about things that are important in our contemporary lives. My hope is that “Exit Wounds” will cause people to reflect upon times in their own lives when they witnessed acts of courage — no matter how small — and think about how they could be a force for good in our turbulent world.



Ballet Austin dancers Kevin Murdock-Waters and James Fuller (standing).