

Ballet Austin aims for the heart with 'Exit Wounds'



Michael Barnes - American-Statesman Staff
12:00 a.m. Monday, April 2, 2018 Filed in [News](#)



Oliver Green-Cramer represents a victim of sexual violence in "Truth Rescued by Time," part of Stephen Mills' "Exit Wounds." Contributed by Anne Marie Bloodgood/Ballet Austin

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Ballet Austin's "Exit Wounds" will play one weekend only at the Long Center.

Stephen Mills: "These people came into my life, made it better, loved me, taught me things."

As their shoulders and limbs roll softly downward, the four male dancers move in tandem. When they pass each other, their interactions look friendly, connected, almost playful, as if echoing Henri Matisse's famous painting, "Dance."

Yet midway through the scene, one dancer lags behind, his face darkened with concern. The other three help him, but they do not appear to grasp the gravity of the situation.

The stricken dancer moves far outside the circle as the other three once again look at each other; this time their expressions ask, "Who is next?"

ADVERTISING



MOST READ

1. Suspect used hypodermic needle as weapon during robbery
2. Data from SUV shows deadly wreck may have been intentional
3. Trump on deal to protect 'Dreamer' immigrants: 'NO MORE'

THINGS TO DO



Warby Parker Celebrates SXSW
Mon, Apr 2 9:00 am



Warby Parker Celebrates SXSW
Mon, Apr 2 10:00 am



Beyond Bollywood: Indian Americans Shape the ...
Mon, Apr 2 10:00 am

Add Event +

SEE MORE →

Ballet Austin artistic director. It plays one weekend only at the Long Center for the Performing Arts.



Get ready for The Spring League Game Day

ADVERTISER CONTENT: The Spring League

The silent interactions were inspired by the companionship shared by Mills and his colleagues at the Harkness Ballet company in New York City during the early 1980s. All three of his fellow dancers eventually died of AIDS.

The two other dances in "Exit Wounds" grew out of Mills' personal experiences with sexual violence and with his mother's death.

"These are stories of courage," Mills says after rehearsal. "It's about the place that these people held in my heart and my history and what happened to me when they left my life. For me in this context, these people came into my life, made it better, loved me, taught me things, but when they left, they took something really important from my heart and soul, not necessarily from my physical body."

Awakened by science

"Exit Wounds" was made possible by a large gift from Beverly Dale, a philanthropist and microbiologist formerly associated with Roche Molecular Systems, a research firm that helped develop the first tests for HIV — the virus that causes AIDS — then later the first antiretroviral drugs. Dale, who splits her time between Austin and the Bay Area, is outspoken on political subjects. She also is devoted to dance and has supported ODC/Dance, a San Francisco modern dance troupe.

"She gave me the opportunity to make the work I wanted to make," Mills says. "Her interest as a scientist is to make something, test it, and from that test refine it, then after multiple revisions, come to an ultimate decision. Ballet should be like that, but because of time constraints, it not always is. She gave me the gift of time."

Indeed, Mills started working with Ballet Austin company members in October, which means he had the luxury of six months, rather than the usual six weeks, of testing. With a blank canvas to fill, he was first drawn to artist Natalie Frank's images of Grimm's fairy tales, but Mills decided to save the idea for next season, when that project will be funded by the first-ever Butler New Choreography Endowment grant.

RELATED: [Longtime patrons give \\$3 million to pay for new works](#)

Instead, for the April 2018 slot, he zeroed in on ideas that might be more personal for donor Dale.

"She's a real vocal citizen," Mills says. "So I hit on the idea of choosing courage over fear. Winston Churchill said, 'Fear is a reaction. Courage is a decision.' We all feel fear. It's what do we do in the face of that fear."

Dances uninterrupted

The commanding image for "Fields," the first of three pieces danced without intermission during "Exit Wounds," came to Mills while he was driving to see his mother for the last time in rural Kentucky.

"I saw acres of rolling fields before the planting season," he recalls. "They were filled with beautiful yellow flowers. That was juxtaposed in my mind with the potential that the day held."

Mills was able to be with his mother when she died. He thought a lot about what might have turned out differently in her life, especially if she had met a more optimal mate than his father.

"I have moments of being completely pessimistic," Mills says, "but I also think of the 'what ifs.' She and my father had an indifferent relationship. I wondered when I started working on the dance — and even before that

person in a field and what a beautiful image that would have been.”

During open rehearsal, we saw an achingly intimate duet from “Fields” set to near-devotional music by Austin composer Graham Reynolds.

RELATED: [Ballet Austin explores love, death and sex](#)

The title of the next piece, “Four Mortal Men,” is taken from Carson McCullers’ atmospheric novella and play “Ballad of the Sad Café.” Mills set the movement to Claude Debussy’s String Quartet in G minor that he had used, by his own admission, less successfully while exploring the same subject matter in the 1990s.

“I was 25 years younger,” he says with a chuckle. “I wasn’t as skilled and wasn’t as prepared personally to be as open about the experience, to be as authentic.”

The subject at hand was his personal introduction to big city life when he was hired by Harkness Ballet in New York during the 1980s.

“The city was full of art all around you, some that you could touch,” he says of the era of graffiti artists Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. “(Neoclassical dance maker) George Balanchine was at his height. The great modern choreographers were alive and making wonderful work. It was a great time to be in New York from that perspective.”

Mills had never been part of a dance company before.

“The other dancers helped me learn what that was,” Mills says. “They also taught me how to take advantage of all the amazing things the city had to offer. It was a dangerous place to live, dangerous to be a gay person, yet one of the most exciting times to be in that city.”

“Four Mortal Men” is told in three movements — quartet, trio and duet — as the central character’s companions fall away. The dancing, Mills says, becomes more intense, passionate with each movement.

The third piece, “Truth Rescued by Time,” deals with sexual violence and taking control of one’s life story, inspired in part by the national movement against sexual misconduct.

“These things have always happened, not just to women, but to men as well,” Mills says. “The dance is about taking courage at this moment in time, finding out what causes changes in attitudes, what causes people to stand up and say, ‘No more,’ and also about those who defend the indefensible.”

During rehearsal, dancer Oliver Green-Cramer was pursued by a black cloud in the form of a large, light sheet of poly silk that Mills had found in storage. Sometimes it billows overhead; at other times it wraps or disguises the dancers.

“We already had it, and I wondered what we could do with it,” he says. “We brought it in and experimented with it. Once we started, we knew it was the right idea.”

In one section of “Truth Rescued by Time,” a group of women gathers while men chant in support from the sidelines. A large dance of protest finalizes the piece.

“When one is willing to tell their story, others are more likely to come forward,” Mills says. “It just takes one person to develop a chorus of voices.”

Ballet Austin’s ‘Exit Wounds’

When: 8 p.m. April 6 and 7, 3 p.m. April 8

Where: The Long Center, 701 W. Riverside Drive

Cost: \$24-\$89

Information: balletaustin.org, 512-476-2163





[VIEW COMMENTS](#) 0

PROMOTED STORIES

Sponsored Links by Taboola

Spring's Chicest Shoe Trend? Kitten Heels
Amazon

(Photos) This Photo Has Not Been Edited, Look Closer
HistoryInOrbit.com

20 Celebrities Whose Siblings Are More Attractive Than They Are
Hooch

Hollywood Actress Tells All: "I Hope My Story Will Help Other Women"
ActivatedYou

Constant Fatigue Is A Warning Sign – See The Simple Fix
Gundry MD

Forget Your 401k if you Own a Home (Do This)
Morning Finance | LendingTree Quotes



Stock up at home and save

Shop Now

Walgreens

MORE FROM STATESMAN.COM

TOPICS

[NATION & WORLD](#) ➔

[NATION & WORLD](#) ➔



Today's the day for free pizza from Little Caesars

3-year-old boy killed in drive-by shooting on Easter Sunday

[NATION & WORLD](#) ➔

[LOCAL](#) ➔

[NATION & WORLD](#) ➔

Pippa Middleton's father-in-law arrested, charged with raping a minor

FORECAST: Overcast Monday, slight chance of rain; cold front looming

5 ways to celebrate National Peanut Butter and Jelly Day

[NEWS](#) ➔



