

[Chava Lansky](#)

## Stephen Mills' World Premiere for Ballet Austin Focuses on Acts of Courage

Stephen Mills with Ballet Austin dancers in rehearsal for "Exit Wounds." Photo by Anne Marie Bloodgood, Courtesy Ballet Austin.

Ballet Austin artistic director Stephen Mills is not known for shying away from [heavy themes](#); his *Light / The Holocaust & Humanity Project* has been performed by companies around the country since its inception in 2005, and April 6-8 Ballet Austin presents the world premiere of [Exit Wounds](#). *Exit Wounds* is about acts of courage big and small, broken down into three chapters, all deeply personal to Mills.

We touched base with Mills about the inspiration behind this monumental work and how to stay upbeat when working with dark subject matter.

### **How did you first come up with the idea for this piece?**

A couple of years ago I came across a quote from Winston Churchill that said, "Fear is a reaction. Courage is a decision." The words were impactful and stayed with me. The past year has caused me to think about the direction of our country and my perception of a lack of leadership and inspiration from the top. This caused me to consider times when I witnessed courage. As the piece started to form, I began to reflect upon three instances in my life when I witnessed acts of courage so profound that it changed my perceptions of life, love, death and empowerment. The first was helping my mother on her journey at the end of her life. The second was around the deaths of friends of mine at the Harkness Ballet during the AIDS crisis and the homophobia and stigmatism they faced. And finally, the women involved in the #MeToo movement.

### **The section focused on the #MeToo movement seems to be both the most topical and the most personal. How did you make the decision to include it?**

When I started the work, the third section was going to be about immigration and the courage it takes to leave your home and everything you own simply to find safety. But after women (of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements) bravely came forward to accuse their perpetrators and demand action, I realized it was my responsibility to do something different. As a survivor of childhood sexual violence, these movements gave me the inspiration and courage to tell this story and claim my empowerment.

### **What do you think is the importance, especially in the dance world, of people sharing their stories of courage in this weighted moment in time?**

I believe that people are more willing to share their stories if they witness others doing so. The dance world is filled with stories of physical, verbal, emotional and sexual abuse at the hands of someone in power. Speaking as someone who wields a bit of power in our industry, I hope my conversation causes others to speak out. Dance is a beautiful art form with the capacity to inspire, inform and teach. But those lessons aren't meant just for the audience.

### **How do you think audiences will react to such a heavy piece?**

My hope is that each member of the audience leaves the theater in some way changed and inspired to act. Art can't change the world—only people can change the world. But art can be used as a catalyst for conversation and change.

### **Do you have any advice for dancers or choreographers on how to maintain a sense of positivity and hope when working with dark subject matter like this?**

Dance history is filled with men and women bravely tackling weighty and challenging subject matter. I believe that if the artists are working from a place of authenticity, the work is easier. Good intentions don't always make good work, but making work from personal experience means that the artist is giving a genuine perspective, and that's meaningful. As artists, we have to prove our relevance every day. Good art represents its time, and, sadly, these are the subject matters of our time.

### **Add Your Voice to the Conversation**

Want to share your own story of courage? As part of a larger dialogue around this work, BA is collecting stories of courage to share with the dance community. Share a video on Facebook or Instagram with the hashtag #ChooseCourageATX (even the [mayor of Austin](#) participated.) You can see a full list of steps [here](#).