

# The New York Times

## Review: A Quieter, Virtual Fall for Dance, With Starriness Intact

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For 17 years, New York City Center's annual Fall for Dance festival has relied on a winning formula. Offer high variety at a low price, sprinkle in some stars and special-event premieres, and you get a populist showcase that feels like a party and an enthusiastic audience that cheers for everything.

Naturally, this year is somewhat different. The price is the same. The variety, stars (Sara Mearns and David Hallberg! Together for the first time!) and premieres are all still on offer. But the portions are reduced: no performing groups larger than three, no international visitors; two programs instead of the usual five or six. Most significantly, the dancers were recorded in the theater, and the audience is scattered, watching online. It's a quieter, more subdued affair.

The streaming of the first program on Wednesday — the second one debuts on Monday, and both are available on demand through Nov. 1 — was glitchy in spots. The video editing was sometimes disorienting, the introductions a little infomercial stiff and distant. Yet despite the difficulties and safety protocols, City Center made it happen: moments of fresh dance magic.

These occurred for me mainly in the two commissioned premieres. The opening number — three members of Ballet Hispánico dancing to peppy Perez Prado tracks in parts of Gustavo Ramírez Sansano's "18+1" — was innocuous and insubstantial, especially when compared with the program's other non-premiere: Martha Graham's classic and once again timely "Lamentation," from 1930.

Natasha M. Diamond-Walker, a standout member of the Graham company, filled the famous costume, a tube of stretchy fabric, with firm grief. And this is a dance that benefits from the close view of a camera. When Ms. Diamond-Walker shaped the fabric into a triangular opening, you could feel the depth of the hole, like a place to add your own sorrow.

**Still, it was the new pieces that dazzled. Jamar Roberts, the resident choreographer of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, presented a solo, "Morani/Mungu (Black Warrior/Black God)." A big, beautiful dancer, Mr. Roberts has no trouble impersonating a god, powerful enough for battle yet benevolent. But the dance also reveals his rarer gifts of subtlety and singular musicality.**

**The solo comes in three parts to three songs: the Last Poets's 1971 Black pride track "Black Is," John Coltrane's "The Drum Thing" and an instrumental version of "You'll Never Walk Alone" played by Nina Simone. Even in his selection of music, Mr. Roberts shows discernment and delicacy about what needs to be said directly and what's better implied.**



**It's typical of Mr. Roberts that the work's climax comes during a drum solo. Jerking, contracting, whipping around in an irregular rhythm, he could be both sides of a fight, though that metaphor is more obvious than what he does. To the final song, about walking through a storm and keeping your head high, he mainly kneels and rolls and lies on the ground. This isn't defeat. It feels like a choice.**

As for the program's star pairing, it's pretty delightful. In "The Two of Us," the esteemed choreographer Christopher Wheeldon has coupled Ms. Mearns and Mr. Hallberg with Joni Mitchell tracks. When ballet dancers go folk or pop, it can be forced and awkward, but the outcome here is good: a loosening on the surface, like a casual outfit through which you can sense the bones of classical technique underneath, supporting the freedom. There's a hint of story about two people who keep drifting apart, and the dance occasionally falls into romantic and choreographic clichés. Mainly, though, it tracks the tone of the songs, at once clear-eyed and wistful, and sometimes, as in Ms. Mitchell's lyrics, "a little bit corny."

Perhaps because Ms. Mitchell is singing, the emotional point of view seems to be that of the woman. And Ms. Mearns is marvelous — relaxed, independent, insouciantly twisting her shoulders and feet, then floating with grace. It may be hard to imagine Joni Mitchell in toe shoes. Ms. Mearns makes it easier.