

Alvin Ailey Choreographer Jamar Roberts: "A Jam Session for Troubling Times" Honors "Bird"

By: Doug Doyle
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Listen here: <https://www.wbgo.org/post/alvin-ailey-choreographer-jamar-roberts-jam-session-troubling-times-honors-bird#stream/0> (25 minutes)

Watch here: <https://fb.watch/2q7nXLmP7w/> (25 minutes)



As part of the free Ailey Forward first-ever virtual holiday season celebrating six decades of Revelations, comes tonight's world premiere of A Jam Session for Troubling Times on Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's website. It's the latest work from acclaimed Ailey dancer and choreographer Jamar Roberts.

During his Zoom chat with WBGO News Director Doug Doyle, Roberts talked about how the December 14 virtual world premiere (7:30pm) that marks the centennial (dubbed Bird100) of jazz revolutionary saxophonist Charlie "Bird" Parker.

"When I think of making dances I first think of the world, I think of the community I'm in and then I think of myself. Then I figure out how can I blend all these things together, take something I care about and put it out into the world so that affects the community and the world in a positive way. When I was approached to do a work for Charlie Parker 100, I actually wasn't very excited in the beginning because the state of everything, being the way that it is, kind of makes it really difficult to get to that type of energy and that type of virtuosity that Bird was dealing with at that time. It took me awhile to get around to figuring out how I was going to engage to this music."



Roberts says he reveres "Bird" as an artist and is a fan of "bebop".

"He's like the father. For me I think when it comes to the music, there would be, all the musicians I love so much, Coltrane, Miles Davis, all these guys, there would be no them if there was no Charlie. I really felt the need to honor that. Even though that sound, we're so far away from that sound now, but in a way, we're not. You listen to other genres like Rap or Hip-Hop, the way that their spitting out lyrics and at the speed at which they're doing them, there's a direct correlation there."

How does choreography start for Jamar Roberts?

"It's different for every choreographer. For me, I have to sit with the music for a very long time. A year is the minimum. If I can sit with it longer, the better. The more that I listen to it, the more I sort of bring the thoughts, ideas and feelings that I have to

that music, a picture does start to form. First, it's several pictures and then it ends up with just one idea, that whenever I hear that music. I take this idea and just kind of expound on it and basically try to bring it to life and make it as big as I can given the amount of resources that I have to do it."



Roberts admits working during the coronavirus has been challenging.

"For the company it's been really difficult because you know dance is a very physical art form. You're always touching, you're sweating, you're breathing on each other, and so the company has really had to you know get with New York state and government and come up with a plan so we can all sort of exist in a space and do what is it we do to the best of our ability. So I think it was really tough for them to begin with but they pulled it off. Once we were able to get back into the studios, I mean there was definitely a very strict COVID protocol, coming into the building with hand sanitization

and testing, temperature checks, all that stuff and then actually dancing in the space. There were squares taped out all over the dance studio floor, and within those squares that's where the dancers were allowed to dance in. Each square was separated six feet from the other square. There definitely were some challenges, but I kind of like challenges. Also, this piece was shot outdoors. So I said well if I can just give them the steps here indoors, in place within their squares, then once we get outside and there's more space to move around, and I can sort make the dance kind of move around the space around without having to worry about COVID situations."

When it comes to performing virtually for Ailey fans, Roberts admits dance is an appropriate form of expression during these difficult times.

"Even though watching dance on the screen is not the most ideal, I think there's something about dance in this moment and using this type of medium that's allowing the entire community to get to know each other. Dancers from other companies and non-dancers, our fans, are getting to see a little bit more insight into who the dancers are, to who the director are, and I think that's really great. I think that can provide much more appreciation for the work that we do and a lot more appreciation for the dancers and our relationship with the people that watch us.



Miami native Jamar Roberts graduated from the New World School of the Arts after beginning his studies at the Dance Empire of Miami, where he continues to teach and mentor students each year. After much success with Ailey, he performed at the White House in 2010, and as a guest star on So You Think You Can Dance, Dancing with the Stars, and the Ellen DeGeneres Show. In 2015, Roberts won Outstanding Performer at the prestigious New York Dance and Performance "Bessie" Awards and was a guest star with London's Royal Ballet. He eventually was appointed as Ailey's first-ever Resident Choreographer. Roberts' Ode was last year's powerful meditation on the beauty and delicacy of life in a time of growing gun violence. The Washington Post wrote "Ode feels like another revelation for Ailey. Robert Battle is smart to give Roberts a platform to develop..Works such as Ode constitute a powerful new director for the company."

You can tell that Roberts has a great working relationship with Robert Battle, the Artistic Director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

"Robert is very easy going and that creates a very specific kind of work space."

Ailey Forward launched its first-ever holiday season with the premiere of "Revelations Reimagined" Opening Night Benefit with special performances and guest including Sterling K. Brown, Phylicia Rashad, Shonda Rhimes, Vanessa Williams, Jeffrey Wright and Oprah Winfrey who spoke of the significance of Revelations. The holiday season has nine special virtual presentations (each available free online for one week) including A Jam Session for Troubling Times.