

[“I Don’t Make Dance For Myself”: Jamar Roberts on Choreography, His Days at Alvin Ailey, and What Comes Next](#)

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After two decades, the acclaimed dancer has retired from the company where he made a huge splash in contemporary dance—but, as he explains to Vanity Fair, this is just the beginning.

On a Monday afternoon in late November, Jamar Roberts, a longtime star of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, was standing in a studio at the company’s expansive, glass-walled school in midtown Manhattan. But instead of joining the group of barefoot and masked dancers as they rehearsed his piece “Holding Space,” Roberts wore cargo pants and kept on pair of black-and-white polka dot Converse. In August, the 39-year-old dancer announced his retirement from the company he’d been a part of since 2002. Now, he watched the rehearsal as choreographer.

Taking on a new role required a bit of a personality shift for Roberts. “I get the idea, the impression that people, as a dancer, they kind of see me as this big, explosive guy,” he said. “Emotions flying all over the place, swinging the girls everywhere. But I’m also older now.” With the dancers, he focuses on drawing those emotions out and focusing them.

Earlier this month, Alvin Ailey made a return to City Center for their first live performances since the pandemic shuttered New York’s theaters and ended in-person cultural events. On December 9, the company devoted one night to celebrating Roberts, during which he performed a solo work and the company premiered a recent, extremely ambitious piece called “Holding Space.”

“Holding Space,” which had a video premiere in June, is somewhat unusual for Roberts to use as his swan song. Instead of the jazz that soundtracked his previous work for the company, he opted for a suite of grim music by ambient composer Tim Hecker, drawn to its virtual sound and the feeling it evoked in him.

In an interview before his night came around, he was feeling apprehensive about the attention— “It’s a little distracting,” he said—but to him, it already felt like a valedictory, not a death. His retirement from dance is a bit like a graduation into his new phase as a high-profile choreographer. He has served as Ailey’s resident choreographer since 2019, and when the pandemic first set in, he drew attention far beyond the dance world for affecting videos where his choreography attempted to capture the fear and pain of the moment. Roberts said that he still plans to work with the company, and in February, the first major departure of his career in choreography will make its debut. He has been working with the New York City Ballet on an original piece and has relished the opportunity to work in a different argot. He said that his decision to retire also had something to do with the fact that he is no longer the young person who premiered with Ailey nearly two decades ago.

Vanity Fair spoke to the dancer about adjusting his creative process to the demands of the pandemic, returning to work with his former colleagues, and why saying goodbye is just the beginning for him.

“I would like for people to know that endings can be beautiful, that they don’t have to be sad,” he said of his preparations to make a last solo performance. “Nothing lasts forever, but it does at the same time in our hearts and in our memories and in the essence of what’s left behind, and also in regards to my performance. That sometimes saying goodbye can be simple and sweet.”

Vanity Fair: How has it felt to make the transition from dancer to choreographer? Was there a steep learning curve?

I was already choreographing stuff and making things in [Miami], where I’m from, before I actually even got into the company. It was just a part of the culture of where I trained. My dance teacher was always choreographing, and she was always talking about creativity and how to make dance that comes from the deepest place. I never really wanted to be a choreographer, I’m a creative. I just like to create anything—dance or things that go beyond dance. So I would do it just for kicks, just for myself, just because I like music and I like to dance.

It took me a very long time to show any choreography in New York. Not because I was afraid, but because I didn’t really see it as something to show because it was a hobby for me. There were a lot of people that kind of encouraged me to show things, and eventually, Robert Battle asked me to choreograph some pieces for the company.

Your first piece for Ailey II premiered in 2015. How did you decide that now is the right time for you to move from dancing to choreography primarily?

Oh, it was very easy because my body is starting to disintegrate.

Oh, no.

I've been dancing for a very long time. What they don't tell dancers when you're young is that when you start to train and when you start to repeatedly kick your leg and pirouette and fall to your knees in all these dances, it is the beginning of the end. It's the beginning of the disintegration of your joints and your muscles. If you do that for almost 20 years, for as long as I've done it, eventually the wear and tear is going to take a toll. So my body was the first thing that told me that you've got to chill out on this. But at the same time, I was also getting visibility and some acclaim for the work that I'd been doing. The two events coincided very nicely, and it made for a nice transition.

So your first big post-Ailey commission is with the New York City Ballet. What has it been like to work with them?

Great, actually. Schedule-wise, they work very differently from Ailey, and I say this first just because scheduling for me is everything, and you have to make a piece your resources are very important. How much time do I have? How many dancers do I have? How long do I have them? How much money do I have? Do I have the ability to create a set or have lighting? Do you have to buy costumes, or can I have a costume designer? All that stuff is really important.

So it's felt like a bit of a crunch to me because they're a bigger company with a ton more dancers. So in terms of resources and like the dancers' availability, it feels a little bit far to the left of what I'm used to. So I have to work a little bit harder. I have to work more efficiently to get the work done in a way that I know I'll like what I see when I'm finished. But other than that, it's been great. It's been really great, and I can't complain beyond that.

Seeing that as a challenge makes sense to me, especially since you did so much work during the pandemic. What was it like for you to see the hardships of the pandemic and its effects, but turn that into an artistically generative time?

Whew, it's been heavy. I mean, if you put pandemic aside, there's been so much going on, like the election. I'm kind of a porous person, where I feel everything all the time. Not even just the big event, but [so much has changed] in the body language of people or in the way that people dress or how we interact in common spaces or looking at a person on a park bench. There's been a lot to take in. When I think of making work, I think it's all there. It all kind of sits with me, and I'm like, "Well, what part of this do I want to speak of? What part about all of this is resonating with me in this moment?" I mean, generative is a very good word because there's a lot to pull from, but I don't know. It's better to have a lot to pull from than very little, so that part is great. But at the same time, it's been heavy, because I don't make dance for myself. I don't make the piece and sit at home and watch it in my own personal theater. It's for people. So if I'm making this dance to speak to people, I think, "What is the one thing that you want to make for people right now?" That, I think, can be a bit daunting because I also have to feel it in order to be able to speak to it and put it out.



You first choreographed "Holding Space" for a virtual, recorded debut during that moment, right? What was the original idea or seed of the idea?

The seed of the idea centered around the fact that I was commissioned to make a work that would be done under heavy COVID restrictions. So the inspiration or the sort of idea that came from, came out of restriction. Like, the first thing I thought of was that the dancers couldn't touch each other, and they had to dance within these squares that were taped out on the floor. So I just kind of went to town with that idea of not being able to touch, and then the visual of squares and the idea of we all kind of exist within these squares. The buildings we live in are squares. The buildings we work in are squares. I don't have the words, but I was just thinking of how we live in a society at large with one another, but we're always sort of relegated to these small spaces that separate us. And sometimes, even those spaces feel incredibly lonely amidst other emotions. Then sometimes those spaces help to build and create community and oneness. But it's never one or the other.

So how did the Tim Hecker music come into that? At the rehearsal you told one of the dancers to think more about the musicality of it, and it prompts a really different sort of musicality than you expect with dancing to something less irregular and surprising. Absolutely. I chose Tim Hecker because it was a virtual premiere. I knew it would be virtual from the beginning, and I just figured it would be an opportunity for me to do something different. A lot of the pieces that I premiered pre-COVID were to jazz music. I also wanted more room. I think sometimes when you have music that's at a very square meter, oftentimes, it kind of restricts

you from being free. Because this music has a lot of space, I was able to say more about the theme while doing less, in terms of the choreography. I don't really think I was successful at that, but I don't think I was unsuccessful either, because the piece still has a lot of steps.

I also wanted something that sounds virtual, like if virtual had a sound. Or if the phones that we talk on or all the technology that we've used to kind of sustain us and keep us connected throughout the pandemic, if all of those instruments, those tools had a sound, what would they sound like? If those sounds had emotions... Like, what if Zoom got tired of doing Zooms just as much as we did, what would the music sound like?

So for the first version of the piece, the virtual premiere, were these rehearsals originally done virtually too? Or were you at first able to get with the dancers in a room? How did that work?

No, the rehearsals were not virtual, luckily enough. Thank you, God, because that would have been a mess. The company was fortunate enough at that time to be able to test dancers, I think it was once or twice a week, and we were masked for the entire process. So that made it possible for us to be in person.

Every time I make a piece, this music and every other music I've ever used, the rest of the dancers don't hear what I hear. So I'm giving these counts, and most times they're really irregular counts, and all they hear is sound and noise. But I've taken it for myself to really dissect the sound and find a rhythm and a tempo to which it can be heard and taught. There's two casts. So it took about, I would say, a week, maybe a little bit over a week for them to really hear it. And then I had to do it again with the second cast, because when I was teaching the first cast... The second cast wasn't in the room when I was teaching the first cast. So when they came in, I don't know, it must have been a month later, I had to explain it again and go through that whole process of them being like, "I don't know what the hell you're talking about." So it took a while.

So in that way, it wasn't so different from when you were still a part of the company. But now you're a bit of an elder statesman. Now that this huge part of your life is coming to an end, what do you hope that people get from this last moment of your career at Ailey?

I think dance has a way of freezing you in this weird adolescence. Every time you go on stage, you don't have a beard. Your hair—you can't see your gray hair. You know what I mean? No one really sees you age in a way, like how a normal life would be. So I think I just want people to know that I'm older. I can't do this forever, and it's okay. It's okay. You'll be fine. Everybody will be fine. I just feel like there's this drama behind it, like a big crowd sigh like, "Oh," like this kind of thing. And I just don't want that. I do understand that that will be there, but it's really not the end of the world, and there will be other great dancers to come after me.

I've gathered that you're a little too pragmatic for that feeling of group mourning!

Yeah. In terms of like "Holding Space", the "Holding Space" premiere, I don't know. This is a tricky question. What do I want the audience to take from the premiere? I don't know. Something having to do with dreams is what I'm thinking. I don't know. For me, I feel like the piece kind of goes from this chaotic moment, and it kind of finishes in a place where it's like... that feels harmonious and that feels like everyone's dancing together and working together in harmony.

I know that for a lot of us right now, the idea of there being a world someday where there is no crime and there is no death, that seems very far-fetched. And maybe it's not ever real. Maybe it's not even human. But it doesn't hurt to dream and to have the seed of that dream be with you day to day. Do you know what I mean? That things can actually be nice, that we can actually go from this really crazy moment of discord to a moment of peace, even if it's for one day. And I think that we've all experienced it personally in our own lives, but I think collectively it can happen as well. For one day, maybe one hour, even, like, 30 minutes.