



## Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre brings 2 dances made for the web to the stage

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December 1, 2021

This radio segment aired 12/1/21 during the 5pm hour: <https://www.npr.org/2021/12/01/1060608507/alvin-ailey-american-dance-theater-brings-2-dances-made-for-the-web-to-the-stage>

Like all performing arts organizations, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater stopped giving in-person concerts in March 2020. During the pandemic, they created online content. Now, two of the pieces that were conceived for streaming are being put onstage, as the company returns to New York's City Center.

Robert Battle, Alvin Ailey's artistic director for the past 10 years, says the dancers were out on the road when everything shut down: "They actually had just flown to Dallas, and we brought them home."

Not only did the tour halt, but the Ailey school and all other activities ceased. Battle says some of the younger members of the company decided to film themselves at home, performing excerpts from Alvin Ailey's masterpiece, "Revelations," and splice together a video. "And I think it spoke to the time," he explains, "because in these little recordings that they put together, you know, you saw their dogs walking across and you saw their children joining in; that their home place became their workplace...like for all of us."



That video sparked the company to create a digital platform, Ailey . And, within strict COVID protocols – this was before there were any vaccines – they began to create new dances to stream. Jamar Roberts, Ailey's resident choreographer, was given an assignment.

"They told me, you know, 'We want to commission you to make a piece, but you must know that this piece has to be socially distant,'" he says. "And I said, 'wow,' and then I said, 'OK,' because I love challenges. I had to figure out how to make a piece where no one touches, where we rehearse in mask the entire performance – so, I can't see any facial expressions – and make it all make sense!" he explains, laughing.



In the video, there are 25 socially distanced squares on the stage, and a large square – a cube – is pushed on, for a solo dance. The work's title, "Holding Space," Roberts explains, is a play on words, three times over.

"It's the wellness term, as in the act of presence and being there for someone," he says. "It is an actual holding space. And then also the word *space* – I kind of deck the piece out in this high-tech, futuristic kind of look, mainly as a veneer to kind of draw the audience in, only to have them later find out that maybe this piece is about something a little bit deeper.

"Essentially," he continues, "what I'm trying to speak to is society, as a collective, and how we are in this moment, to me, that feels very fast. And it feels very volatile, and it feels very high speed all the time."

Battle created his own socially distanced dance for streaming. A quartet, it's called "For Four." It has its own multiple meanings. "The music is in 4/4," Battle explains. "It's [by] Wynton Marsalis."

Like Roberts, Battle was attempting to capture the moment: "It's frenetic. It's a little saucy. That frenetic-ness is both fun and, also, I think, speaks to the way we've all felt; a little like we don't know if we're going or coming. Should we be happy?"

Are we angry? Are we sad?" He adds, "Not just because of the pandemic, but because of the political atmosphere, because of the racial atmosphere, if you will. All of the things that were going on. Take one of them and it's enough to cause severe anxiety. Take them all together, *and* we're not able to be on stage where we usually can dance that stuff out." He grunts. "Uch! We needed 'For Four.' We needed something to kind of bring us together."

And now, audiences will be able to see "For Four" live as it enters Ailey's repertory. Battle says he didn't need to change much, since the filmed version was choreographed on a proscenium stage, and the camera zoomed in on individual performers.



"Holding Space," Roberts says, is "essentially the same piece, without the squares. That is what I tried to do. I didn't want to, you know, suddenly choreograph moves where people were touching each other, because I wanted it to be a sort of a document of that particular time."

The company's three-week season at New York's City Center, incidentally, will be the last time Roberts appears with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. He'll be retiring, and performing a new solo, called "You Are the Golden Hour That Would Soon Evanesce," which documents his feelings right now.