

## A Year In: Stephen Mills, Ballet Austin artistic director



Ballet Austin artistic director Stephen Mills with dancer Grace Morton in rehearsal. Video still by Jordan Moser.

By **Sightlines** April 9, 2021

*The series 'A Year In' catches up with artists now that the coronavirus pandemic has passed its one-year mark.*

Artistic director of Ballet Austin since 2000, Stephen Mills has created more than 40 dance works not only for his company, but for dance companies across the United States and abroad. Under his leadership, [Ballet Austin](#) has performed at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., the Joyce Theatre in New York and toured Israel and China.

**Sightlines: What were you working on and looking forward to when the lockdown began in mid-March 2020? What was the first of your work you saw cancelled or lost?**

**Stephen Mills:** At the beginning of March 2020 Ballet Austin was preparing to present an evening of work centered on Austin's amazing musical history. Austin Chamber Music Center, Tosca String Quartet and Austin Classical Guitar were our collaborating partners. I had created two new works and we were revising two which had not been presented in decades. We shut down three weeks before the premiere imagining that we would take a couple of weeks off and then be prepared for the shows. Obviously, that did not happen and that continued to be the pattern for the remainder of that season and the beginning of the next.

It was only after "The Nutcracker" that we decided to accept that we were in a pause and start to look forward to a time we might be confident of our ability to hold performances and classes. In total we cancelled seven series of performances which was a huge loss.

**S: What part of the pandemic were you surprised to find being a creative benefit?**

**SM:** In a performance organization such as ours we have two things: people and art. The entire focus of our Executive Director Cookie Ruiz and myself at the beginning of the lockdown was our people — assuring them that we were focused on the problem — and working as hard as possible to continue paying their salaries. It was very difficult but we have been successful.

Like many people, at the beginning I was confused, denying, angry, and depressed not knowing how this would all play out. Every moment of every day was worrisome and challenging. And as difficult as I found the situation there were others who were affected much more negatively. It was quite a while before I was able to think about dance making. I have always needed a goal or deadline in order to work. And without a date certain to return to the stage I could not go into the studio.

But when the dancers returned in September to train for an uncertain future, I slowly became inspired and started to make small little movement gestures. We were and are presently working in pods of five dancers. Socially distancing in dancemaking is difficult but collectively we worked it out and made a series of solos that are being turned into a film project that was captured at the Scottish Rite Theater, "[Preludes/Beginnings.](#)" As I have never made a dance for camera this is really exciting.

*Ballet Austin dancer Courtney Holland in class. Video still by Jordan Moser.*

**S: What changes do you want to see in ballet, how it's practiced professionally and how it's presented to an audience? What could should the so-called 'new normal' of ballet look like?**

**SM:** I am not sure if any of us know how the past year will have shaped us as individuals once the pandemic has subsided. I think we are all in a place where we are picking things up and re-examining them. Besides the pandemic the most important conversation this year surfaced after the murder of George Floyd and the search for justice for him and so many others in our ongoing American history of racism. As that relates to dance, Ballet Austin, along with a cohort of about 26 of the country's ballet companies have been engaged over the past four years in a discussion about systemic racial bias in our field. This is a conversation in which we are fortunate to engage.

**S: Artistically, what's next that you look forward to, and are excited by?**

**SM:** Though there have been many difficult moments throughout the year, artistically I am missing the unencumbered time with dancers — being in the room sharing ideas and collaborating. The obvious is that I look forward to having in-person performances that allow the audience to see the commitment and artistry of our dancers.