



[A dance about gun violence is touring nationally with Alvin Ailey's company](#)

By: Brandon Gates

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Jamar Roberts did not initially know he would create a piece to address gun violence. But he did know he needed dance to cope, after years of headlines about its victims: Michael Brown, Tamar Rice, Philando Castile, Jordan Edwards and many, many more.

"It's the first thing I thought I needed to do — just for my own self, to help process what I was seeing in the media," Roberts told NPR. "It didn't really come out like 'Oh, I want to make a dance about this.' I just started sort of moving. It just appeared."

Ode is a poem to Black victims of police brutality. It was conceived in 2019, during his tenure as a resident choreographer at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. It's featured in the company's national tour around the United States that continues through spring 2024.

Roberts' work is heavy. It depicts death and purgatory.

The stage is very simple. A huge backdrop of funeral flowers hung upside down nearly touch the dancers' heads. One lies motionless on stage, their back to the audience. Five other dancers meticulously move forward and as an ensemble, try to support the fallen. Gun violence is not explicit in the work.

Ode is set to Don Pullen's 2014 jazz composition, "Suite (Sweet) Malcolm (Part 1 Memories and Gunshots)."

In some performances, the dancers are all men. In others, all women. Roberts said they allude to family and friends left behind, in the wake of tragedies.

These tragedies are increasing. According to a recent report released by the nonprofit Mapping Police Violence, 2023 marked the deadliest year for homicides committed by police since the organization began tracking them a decade ago.

According to the report, 1,232 people were killed in officer-involved shootings, with Black people disproportionately accounting for 26% of deaths, despite only making up 14% of the population.

"It's an alchemy," said Roberts acknowledging the intensity of the subject. [Dance] can be for entertainment, but I can also take the hard pieces of life and turn them into beauty. It's like taking poison and turning it into medicine."

Listen here:

<https://www.npr.org/2024/02/14/1230978019/alvin-ailey-dance-gun-violence-ode-jamar-roberts> (2 minutes)