

The New York Times

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December 28, 2019

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'Just Speaking From My Body'

The dancer Linda Celeste Sims talks about pouring her experiences into 'Cry.'

By SHIOBAN BURKE

Every so often a great dancer transcends her own brilliance, somehow expanding its outer limit. Last week at City Center, Linda Celeste Sims, a member of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for 24 years, did just that in a rapturous performance of Ailey's 1971 "Cry," a 16-minute solo dedicated "to all black women everywhere — especially our mothers."

This season Ms. Sims, 43, danced the work for the first time as a mother — she gave birth to her first child, Ellington, in May — and something shifted.

"I went deep; I went really deep," she said in a telephone interview on Thursday, reflecting on her performance the night before. "It almost felt like I wasn't performing for you; I was actually just speaking from my body."

"I kind of was in a zone," she added, "in a very spiritual zone." The audience was right there with her.

Ailey choreographed "Cry" as a birthday present for his mother, Lula Elizabeth Cooper. Its three sections — to music by Alice Coltrane, Laura Nyro and the Voices of East Harlem — carry the soloist through states of grieving and rejoicing. In the opening section, the dancer's manipulations of a long white cloth call up images of domestic labor, maternal care and regal independence. The sorrow of the second section turns to euphoria in the third, as she flings and kicks up her white ruffled skirt to the chant of "right on, be free."

Judith Jamison, who first danced the solo, described her interpretation of the role in an interview with The New York Times in 2000: "I was to be a woman who did the most servile of work but was never defeated by it. I was a mother protecting her children. I was a queen who'd come from Africa." The dancers who have inherited the solo, Ms. Sims among them, are coached to draw from personal experience to access its emotional depths.

Ms. Sims — who is married to Glenn Allen Sims, also a longtime Ailey dancer — spoke about pouring her life experience into a performance as electric for her as it was for those watching. Here are edited excerpts from the conversation.

How did you feel before going onstage?

I started crying because I was going so deep in emotion. I was like, "O.K., you can't start crying before you start the piece because then you won't get through it — we need to focus." It just came up, and I'm glad I was

able to share that with the audience, because it's sometimes a scary part of being a dancer, to be very vulnerable.

How has being a mother changed your relationship to "Cry"?

I've probably done the piece for over 15 years, close to 20, and it has never felt so full of nonstop emotion. I lost my dad last year. He passed away in May, and it's interesting because my husband and I were trying to conceive a child for about a year and a half, and a month after my father passed away, I got pregnant. It was almost like where there's death, there's life.

So I have all of that emotion of losing someone who you really love and you're very close to. But when you have your own child, it's like a new understanding of what love means, you know?

And all of that came into your performance?

There are lots of little bits of the piece where I feel that I go into a dark place, and I was able to actually open those channels and allow it to happen. I was using all the struggle, the pain, the no sleep, the stress, the happiness, the joy — everything that I experienced in these past eight months and before.

I was a little bit out of breath, but that's O.K. — I felt like I got through it pretty good, and besides that, I felt good inside, I felt good in my heart.

Were you thinking about your son?

There are parts of the piece where I'm carrying the cloth and it's like, it could be his body. What if he dies?

Alvin choreographed the piece for his mother, but who knows what she actually went through. There are a lot of weighty gestures, weighty movements in the piece. So I try to imagine: What if that was my child? What if that was my child that was murdered? What if that was my child being abused?

This was your second "Cry" this season.

Was the first as intense?

The first time I didn't let it go all the way. I think I was afraid it wouldn't read to the audience. But I thought: "Why am I holding just that little, like, 30 percent of it, why am I still holding on to that?" I said, "There's no room for that today. I just want to be honest."

How have you felt physically, coming back to dancing after pregnancy?

My approach is, be gentle with your body. I look at my body now, and I'm like, "I've got a different shape." As dancers we think we have to look a certain way, we have to be cut, we have to be thin. No. It's not about that. I'm happy. This body has given life, and I look at myself and love myself even more. This is it, this is me.



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LINDA CELESTE SIMS
ALVIN AILEY DANCER

ANDREA MOHRN/THE