

The Star-Ledger

The last dance: Jamar Roberts takes final bow for Alvin ailey Dance Theater

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December 5, 2021

Perhaps you don't remember the exact steps or the story behind the dance. What's unforgettable, however, is the dancer the tall, commanding man whose strength and grace are barely contained on a stage.

Jamar Roberts, the resident choreographer of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, has been a captivating presence with the company for nearly 20 years. His last dance with Ailey will be Thursday at the troupe's Manhattan home, New York City Center. The program, "Celebrating Jamar Roberts: Jamar Roberts Solo/ Holding Space/ For Four/ Revelations," is part of the company's annual residency at the New York City theater through Dec. 19.



Roberts will not be performing when the Ailey company makes its annual stop at NJPAC over Mother's Day 2022 weekend, though NJPAC holds a special place in his heart. He reflected on this, a career in dance, and how he was productive during the pandemic in a recent Zoom chat with NJ Advance Media.

"It was really the first elite performance that I saw up close, like walking by the costumes and wardrobe, and seeing the dancers rehearse," Roberts, 39, recalls shortly after former artistic director Judith Jamison hired him. "And so I love NJPAC for that reason because I was about to get started. It's like, have you ever seen this movie â€” Narnia'? It's the door in that closet."

On the other side of that wardrobe door was the magic of dance. He first crossed that threshold in elementary school when a fifth-grade classmate in Jacksonville, Florida, mentioned a new, after-school dance group needed boys. "The walk to school was like five minutes away, so my parents didn't know or didn't have to know, I guess, but I just took myself there," he recalls. "And I just started doing dance classes."

There was little formality about this training. It wasn't a studio with burnished wood floors and walls lined with mirrors, but a classroom with plastic chairs pushed to the side, an English teacher leading students through an eclectic mix of steps. He recalled dancing to Mariah Carey tunes.

"I guess it wasn't even a style," Roberts says. "It was just interpreting. But I just continued to go just because it was something for me to do." By sixth grade, Roberts started taking ballet and eventually went to a magnet school for the arts. Initially, he studied visual arts, but once he saw dancers perform at a school assembly, Roberts recalls, "I fell in love with it right away."

And so he began training in earnest, and a teacher soon realized his potential. As Roberts chats, it's from his teacher's home in Florida, where he stays when he's in Miami. As his dance education progressed, he learned about modern dance and about the Ailey company, long the pinnacle of combining ballet, modern and African steps into stirring pieces.

That usual single-mindedness that fuels so many dancers didn't exist in the soft-spoken Roberts. He loved dance, sure, but had so many other interests â€” writing graphic novels, designing, fashion â€” that Roberts admits he was already in the Ailey company for a few years when he realized that yes, being a dancer could be his career.

After about five years, Roberts committed fully to dance. He lived in Washington Heights and commuted downtown to the Ailey studios. He was broke all the time and whatever money he had he spent eating out around Lincoln Center. He laughs, recalling how he finally found the cheap pizzerias.

At 6-feet, 4-inches, and muscular, Roberts resembles an athlete but never played sports. He isn't outdoorsy and doesn't like to be in rowdy environments. Solitary dance suited him, and even the pandemic didn't slow him.

"I did a lot," he says of the time at home. "It kind of like pushed me into other creative spaces, and I always enjoy that."

He choreographed during the pandemic and one result is "Cooped," which shows him dancing in a tiny space. Roberts also choreographed a piece that will be performed this season, "Holding Space," an interpretation of this time of forced solitude.

"It's about the collective us, our society, and about how, at least in the time that I made the piece this, feels very fast and it feels very disjointed - I mean as a human species in the ways that we relate to each other," through technology, he says of the dance for which he also designed the dove gray costumes.

The piece begins fast, Roberts explains, "there's this feeling of like, of tumult, and we're kind of like in the same place, but just kind of like rushing and running past each other and by the end of the piece ... it's slower, and it's a peaceful vibe."

The dance represents a dream, one in which society moves toward harmony, he adds. While he won't be dancing the 20-minute long piece, he will dance Thursday night. A couple of weeks before that final step, Roberts reflects on how he feels and there's not a melancholy tinge to his voice.

"I feel great," he says after pausing to consider the moment. "I mean as long as I'm (the) resident choreographer and making work for the company, I am going to be involved. And as I've been there for almost 20 years, that's really a really long time. You know, it's like if you were married to somebody for over 20 years. Unless they did something terrible to you, you'd probably still be in touch, able to have a decent conversation. So I kind of feel that way."

Few dancers escape the art unscathed after punishing their bodies for years. His body was telling him it was time.

"I think for dancers when that happens, we can't really deny that," he acknowledges.

Even after he leaves the stage after what's guaranteed to be a sustained ovation, Roberts is not leaving dance. He'll continue as Ailey's first resident choreographer, and he's working on pieces for other dance companies. So, he will continue to create.

"I always knew that I wanted to wake up every day and live for art and live for creativity," Roberts says. "I want to wake up and have this lifestyle where everything that I do is geared toward the act of art-making."