

# The New York Times

Expressing A Sorrow Without End

By: Brian Seibert

December 12, 2019

NEWS | CRITICISM

## Arts

The New York Times

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2019 CI

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BRIAN SEIBERT | DANCE REVIEW



JULIETA CERVANTES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

# Expressing A Sorrow Without End

Jamar Roberts's work about gun violence is an emotional assault.

SAY YOU'RE A CHOREOGRAPHER and you want to make a dance about gun violence — not a polemical piece but a mournful one. How might you express a grief that's personal and public, and whose source shows no sign of stopping?

An obvious option: bodies on the ground. And sure enough, those appear in Jamar Roberts's "Ode," which had its premiere at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at City Center on Tuesday.

"Ode" isn't obvious, though. It's delicate, daring and heartbreaking. Pitfalls of maudlin cliché surround the subject, but Mr. Roberts has skirted them, above all through his bold choice of music.

Don Pullen's 1975 solo piano improvisation "Suite (Sweet) Malcolm (Part I: Memories and Gunshots)" begins and ends as a jazz ballad, tenderly ruminative and soulful. But in the middle it goes way, way out into

cats-pouncing-across-the-keyboard territory. Whether or not you think of that section as a shootout, you will probably experience it as an assault. In a sense, the work becomes about how the cast of six dancers get across it, how they get over.

It may be the title of the track that grabbed Mr. Roberts's attention, but it's how he hears the music that makes "Ode" engrossing. Only his second work for the company, "Ode" validates the decision to make him the troupe's first resident choreographer. He clearly has things to say and a fresh way of saying them.

His emotions and his musicality are hooked up in a distinctive, quietly persuasive fashion. In "Ode," his sensuous, full-bodied choreography is anchored in the music at a deep enough level that it's free to flow over the surface in its own form, slowing and speeding and sometimes maintain-

From left, Chalvar Monteiro, Jeroboam Bozeman, Michael Jackson Jr., Renaldo Maurice and Solomon Dumas in Jamar Roberts's "Ode."

 **Alvin Ailey  
American Dance  
Theater**  
City Center

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ing two tempos at once.

Something similar is at work among the dancers. Their connection is palpably strong but under threat, and the interplay of unison and do-your-own-thing — the call-and-response between soloist and group — keeps up an underlying tension parallel to the music's.

Often, the dancers band together, hand in hand, arm in arm. And still they fall, one or another, the collapse coinciding with a slammed bass note, a sudden synchronicity that gives a formal feeling to the pain.

There's a formal feeling, also, to Libby Stadstad's scenic design: a giant backdrop of cloth netting in a wallpaperlike floral pattern reminiscent of Kehinde Wiley paintings. The costumes, by Mr. Roberts, are simple pajama pants, subtly stained. The torsos of the all-male opening-night cast (an alternate cast is all-female) are bare.

The premiere of "Ode" came in the middle of a program celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Ailey school. "Memoria," the only work by Alvin Ailey to feature students, opened the evening, and students danced in the aisles at the end of the standard closer, "Revelations."

It's always nice to see young and eager

"Ode," right, by the choreographer Jamar Roberts, is delicate, daring and heartbreaking.



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**Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater**  
Through Jan. 5 at City Center,  
Manhattan; nycitycenter.org.

talent, but the program also had less apparent signs of continuity and renewal. "Memoria," made in 1979, feels dated. Its 1970s jazz score, by Keith Jarrett, is all tender memories and no gunshots so to speak — it's easy listening. And much of the choreography is boilerplate, even corny in spots (though Jacqueline Green, in the lead role, is too majestic and dignified to ever look foolish).

Still, "Memoria" contains many lessons in craftsmanship, and Mr. Roberts seems to be learning them. Both "Memoria" and "Ode" are circular. "Memoria" starts with its lead woman in an attitude of prayer and ends with her in the same pose, lifted by others.

"Ode" starts with a man on the ground and ends that way, too. The others don't lift him up. They surround him in a kind of daisy-chain Pietà formation. And then they leave.

This circular structure is honest, without the default Ailey uplift. It says something sad and awful about the state of the world. But that very honesty says something hopeful about the present and future of this company. It now has a resident choreographer with talent and guts.