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Ballet Austin dancer Courtney Holland in the stage version of Stephen Mills' "PRELUDES/BEGINNINGS." Photo by Anne Marie Bloodgood, courtesy Ballet Austin.

COMPANY LIFE

How 3 Choreographers Revamped Their Pandemic Dance Films for Live Performances



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For almost two years, the pandemic forced ballet dancers to step off the stage—and onto the screen. As dance organizations adjusted to keep audiences and dancers safe, many choreographers turned their focus to creating dance for film. Now, as companies have transitioned back to the theater, a number of dancemakers have redesigned their film creations for in-person performances.

What goes into transforming a work from screen to stage? What gets added, lost or modified? *Pointe* spoke with three choreographers to learn what made the process challenging and interesting, from adjusting their visions to rediscovering the joy of working with dancers in person.

Stephen Mills: *PRELUDES/BEGINNINGS*

In April 2021, Ballet Austin artistic director Stephen Mills unveiled [*PRELUDES/BEGINNINGS*](#), a chilling dance film made in partnership with former company dancer and award-winning filmmaker [Paul Michael Bloodgood](#). Set to Frédéric Chopin's *24 Preludes* for piano, the ballet was shot in Austin's historic Scottish Rite Theater and explores the idea of ghostly presences in theatrical spaces. The work, featuring 23 solo dances and one pas de deux, won a Lone Star Emmy award in Entertainment—Short Form or Long Form Content.



JAIME LYNN WITTS IN THE FILM VERSION OF STEPHEN MILLS' *PRELUDES/BEGINNINGS*. PHOTO BY JORDAN MOSER AND PAUL MICHAEL BLOODGOOD, COURTESY BALLET AUSTIN.

Mills recalls the process feeling “circumstantial,” largely influenced by the theater space and COVID safety protocols. Dancers were masked and remained almost entirely distanced. And while he enjoyed the filmmaking process, Mills felt unsatisfied by the limited dialogue he could have with audiences.

“I felt the dance was strong and the work the dancers did was really strong,” says Mills. “I wondered what it would be like to move it from the digital format to live performance, with a musician onstage, stripping away the narrative.”

Mills started reworking *PRELUDES/BEGINNINGS* for the company’s September 2021 performances at Austin’s Long Center for the Performing Arts. The stage version looks quite different—Mills pared the cast down to five dancers out of the original 20 and linked existing choreographic phrases together into longer solos, duets and quartets. The ballet also underwent a visual redesign, with new lighting, spacing and colorful costumes by Reid Bartelme and Harriet Jung.



DR. MICHELLE SHUMANN (PLAYING PIANO) WITH CHELSEA MARIE RENNER, OLIVER GREENE CRAMER, ELISE PEKAREK, JAMES FULLER AND COURTNEY HOLLAND IN THE STAGE VERSION OF STEPHEN MILLS' *PRELUDES/BEGINNINGS*. PHOTO BY ANNE MARIE BLOODGOOD, COURTESY BALLET AUSTIN.

The entire mood shifted too. “I knew it was never going to be what it was on film,” says Mills. “I wanted a different version that was special for a different reason. After a year and a half of

not being able to be with our audience, I wanted to celebrate dance in its purest form, offering an uplift. And at the end of the day, it was onstage.”

Penny Saunders: *Amiss*

Grand Rapids Ballet resident choreographer [Penny Saunders](#) took a different approach when translating her 2020 dance film, [Amiss](#), to the stage. Saunders chose to project the original film and outtake footage onto screens behind the dancers and on other devices (one computer and a few phones) around the space. The dancers interacted with all of these devices throughout the piece to introduce retrospection and “layers of reality” during GRB’s live performances in March.

The original film integrated home video from GRB company members, with editing by [Quinn Wharton](#) and her own sound mixing of dancers’ commentary. Since they were limited to personal-device recordings, Saunders wasn’t particularly pleased with the result. So when artistic director James Sofranko asked if she could turn it into a stage piece two years later, Saunders was unsure where to begin.

“I thought, How do I deal with that—something I don’t necessarily love, and where all the original source material was from living rooms, apartments, outside, etc.? It was never even a piece, but a bunch of pieces we put together to get its own dynamic through editing.”