

THEATER & DANCE

Waiting to begin again: Ballet Austin's 'Preludes/Beginnings'

Dance review: Stephen Mills' wondrously haunting choreography articulates our collective experience over the past year while reflecting on the universality of loss



Dance review: Stephen Mills' wondrously haunting choreography articulates our collective experience over the past year while reflecting on the universality of loss



Jaime Lynn Witts in Ballet Austin's "Preludes/Beginnings," with choreography by Stephen Mills. Filmed at the Scottish Rite Theater in Austin. Film still by Paul Michael Bloodgood and Jordon Moser.

By **Barbara Purcell** - April 19, 2021

 Like 67



It's been over a year since Ballet Austin has performed for a live audience. But now the dancers have returned to the stage with a film. "Preludes/Beginnings" is available online, free of charge, until April 25. Shot on site at Austin's Scottish Rite Theater, and set to Frédéric Chopin's 24 Preludes for solo piano (performed by Martha Argerich), the production takes us through the 45-minute cycle with an array of solos and duets.

Artistic Director Stephen Mills, along with filmmaker and former Ballet Austin dancer Paul Michael Bloodgood, conceived of the film project. The first of its kind for Ballet Austin, a way for the entire company to stay connected to the process of dance-making during lockdown. The result is a moving nocturne that articulates our collective experience over the past year while reflecting on the universality of loss.

Related: ['Ballet Austin saw seven productions cancelled. For artistic leader Stephen Mills, the creative loss was also unencumbered time with the dancers'](#)

Chopin created these 24 compositions in the winter of 1838, during an extended stay in Mallorca with his companion, the French novelist George Sand, and her two children. Upon arrival, he is believed to have been diagnosed with tuberculosis by a local doctor and banished from the main city, to a remote abandoned monastery. Isolation and seclusion drove Chopin to create this cycle, in the face of his own frailty: short, varied,



Newsline

UT Landmarks acquires Simone Leigh sculpture

Art **Jeanne Claire van Ryzin** - April 15, 2021

0

Ballet Austin presents new dance film 'Preludes/Beginnings' free of charge

Newsline **Sightlines** - April 9, 2021

0

Bass Concert Hall to get \$3 million in improvements

Newsline **Jeanne Claire van Ryzin** - April 6, 2021

0



Chopin created these 24 compositions in the winter of 1838, during an extended stay in Mallorca with his companion, the French novelist George Sand, and her two children. Upon arrival, he is believed to have been diagnosed with tuberculosis by a local doctor and banished from the main city, to a remote abandoned monastery. Isolation and seclusion drove Chopin to create this cycle, in the face of his own frailty: short, varied, and highly emotive pieces which are now among his greatest masterpieces.

The preludes range from soft to explosive, lyrical and anthemic. Mills choreographed in accordance with their fluctuations. The slow-tempo compositions, for instance, feature sublime adagios. Whereas the lively études invite a lovely briskness. Given the brevity of each one, there is something for everyone.



“Preludes/Beginnings” opens with the warm crackle of a record player conjuring an earlier epoch, haunted by history. The Scottish Rite Theater dates back to the early 1870’s, the oldest such venue in Austin, having been a German opera house for 40 years before the Scottish Rite Masons took over. During the 1918 influenza pandemic, the building housed convalescents, whose spirits supposedly still roam its halls.

In this sense, it is the perfect place to film a dance production in these unusual times.

Newsline

UT Landmarks acquires Simone Leigh sculpture

Art Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 15, 2021 **0**

Ballet Austin presents new dance film ‘Preludes/Beginnings’ free of charge

Newsline Sightlines - April 9, 2021 **0**

Bass Concert Hall to get \$3 million in improvements

Newsline Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 6, 2021 **0**

The HOPE Outdoor Gallery art park and events venue set to open this summer

Newsline Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 3, 2021 **0**

Contemporary Austin to open major Daniel Johnston exhibition

Art Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 1, 2021 **1**

In this sense, it is the perfect place to film a dance production in these unusual times.

The camera moves through the sepia space, before bringing us onstage, where a ghost light illuminates like a tabernacle. Traditionally used in a theater setting, the ghost light is a bare bulb that stays on all night, to keep the spirits at bay.



Ballet Austin dancers Oliver Greene-Cramer, Kevin Murdock-Waters, Edward Carr, Jaimie Lynn Witts, and Paul Martin, in "Preludes/Beginnings," with choreography by Stephen Mills. Film still by Paul Michael Bloodgood and Jordon Moser.

A wraithlike figure emerges, and gently puts it out with her supernatural touch. Five dancers (the performance's only ensemble) stand silently in near darkness, enshrouded, then awakened by the music. They appear backlit by another era, at times, apparitional, as they move through light and space almost gleefully. Flesh-toned face masks bring us

Newsline

UT Landmarks acquires Simone Leigh sculpture

Art Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 15, 2021 **0**

Ballet Austin presents new dance film 'Preludes/Beginnings' free of charge

Newsline Sightlines - April 9, 2021 **0**

Bass Concert Hall to get \$3 million in improvements

Newsline Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 6, 2021 **0**

The HOPE Outdoor Gallery art park and events venue set to open this summer

Newsline Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 3, 2021 **0**

Contemporary Austin to open major Daniel Johnston exhibition

Art Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 1, 2021 **1**

A wraithlike figure emerges, and gently puts it out with her supernatural touch. Five dancers (the performance's only ensemble) stand silently in near darkness, enshrouded, then awakened by the music. They appear backlit by another era, at times, apparitional, as they move through light and space almost gleefully. Flesh-toned face masks bring us back to the present.

The choreography is wondrously pretty: effortless lines, gathering chaînés, penchés which could touch a chandelier. Such movement was made for Chopin's pieces, which are a bit like poems themselves.

But there is a creeping darkness. Sharp whispers arise between preludes. Unearthly high-pitched strings sound like a slasher. Horror film camera angles backstage distract from the classically-trained ghosts onstage. The austere set, and vacant space — the history of the building itself—already add to a natural eeriness.

It's something along the lines of choreographer/composer Meredith Monk in the mid-1990s, with her onsite performance at a crumbling sanatorium on New York City's Roosevelt Island. In such a setting, much like the Scottish Rite Theater, the spirits speak for themselves.



Newsline

UT Landmarks acquires Simone Leigh sculpture

Art Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 15, 2021

0

Ballet Austin presents new dance film 'Preludes/Beginnings' free of charge

Newsline Sightlines - April 9, 2021

0

Bass Concert Hall to get \$3 million in improvements

Newsline Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 6, 2021

0

The HOPE Outdoor Gallery art park and events venue set to open this summer

Newsline Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 3, 2021

0

Contemporary Austin to open major Daniel Johnston exhibition

Art Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 1, 2021

1



Ballet Austin dancer Courtney Holland in "Preludes/Beginnings," with choreography by Stephen Mills. Film still by Paul Michael Bloodgood and Jordon Moser.

Highlights include the performers' diaphanous gowns — utterly translucent and convalescent — as well as the use of simple scrims and lighting. The most memorable backdrop is no backdrop at all, exposing folded ladders and tables neatly hanging in place. Mostly doing away with screens allows other elements to fall away as well, creating a timeless elegiac experience stretched across a century:

"Preludes/Beginnings" is dedicated to frontline workers, both past and present.

The final prelude is the most thrashing of the cycle, a solo performed frantically by a dancer who will not so gently into that good night. (Unfortunately, there is no prologue



Newsline

UT Landmarks acquires Simone Leigh sculpture

Art Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 15, 2021 **0**

Ballet Austin presents new dance film 'Preludes/Beginnings' free of charge

Newsline Sightlines - April 9, 2021 **0**

Bass Concert Hall to get \$3 million in improvements

Newsline Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 6, 2021 **0**

The HOPE Outdoor Gallery art park and events venue set to open this summer

Newsline Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 3, 2021 **0**

Contemporary Austin to open major Daniel Johnston exhibition

Art Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 1, 2021 **1**



The final prelude is the most thrashing of the cycle, a solo performed frantically by a dancer who will not go gentle into that good night. (Unfortunately there is no program with the online show.) Her white gown catches light like a glowing lantern as she pushes across the stage; a final gasp from Chopin and all of humanity.

“Preludes/Beginnings” reminds us that we have been here before.

The scratchy record reemerges, this time a woman softly hums as if it were a lullaby. The dancer wraps a soft shroud around her face and disappears into the darkness. The ghost light is all that remains. Holding vigil, waiting to begin again.

“Preludes/Beginnings” continues to stream for free through April 25. See below. More information at balletaustin.org/performances/preludes-beginnings-web-portal/



Newsline

UT Landmarks acquires Simone Leigh sculpture

Art Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 15, 2021 0

Ballet Austin presents new dance film 'Preludes/Beginnings' free of charge

Newsline Sightlines - April 9, 2021 0

Bass Concert Hall to get \$3 million in improvements

Newsline Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 6, 2021 0

The HOPE Outdoor Gallery art park and events venue set to open this summer

Newsline Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 3, 2021 0

Contemporary Austin to open major Daniel Johnston exhibition

Art Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 1, 2021 1



TAGS Ballet Austin dance review Paul Michael Bloodgood Stephen Mills



Barbara Purcell

Barbara Purcell is an arts and culture writer based in Austin. She is the author of Black Ice: Poems (Fly by Night Press, 2006). In addition to Sightlines, her work has appeared in the Austin Chronicle, Canadian Art, Glasstire, and Tribes Magazine. She is a graduate of Skidmore College.

Related articles



Newsline Ballet Austin presents new dance film 'Preludes/Beginnings' free of charge



Theater & Dance A Year In: Stephen Mills, Ballet Austin artistic director



Theater & Dance Living in a bubble: Gesel Mason's 'burst!'

Newsline

UT Landmarks acquires Simone Leigh sculpture

Art Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 15, 2021 0

Ballet Austin presents new dance film 'Preludes/Beginnings' free of charge

Newsline Sightlines - April 9, 2021 0

Bass Concert Hall to get \$3 million in improvements

Newsline Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 6, 2021 0

The HOPE Outdoor Gallery art park and events venue set to open this summer

Newsline Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 3, 2021 0

Contemporary Austin to open major Daniel Johnston exhibition

Art Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - April 1, 2021 1

