

# 'Preludes/Beginnings,' Ballet Austin's ghostly, haunting pandemic dance

**Michael Barnes** [Austin 360](#)

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Dancer Maxim Vladimirovich with others in Ballet Austin's film "Preludes/Beginnings." CONTRIBUTED BY PAUL MICHAEL BLOODGOOD AND JORDAN MOSER



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To be blunt, only a handful of pandemic-era streaming videos made by Austin artists have hit home for me.

Ballet Austin produced two of them.

That is likely due to the fact that the company employs a gifted filmmaker, Paul Michael Bloodgood, who not only documents dance in an artful way, but thinks and sees cinematically.

The first offering was a straightforward, multi-camera record of "[The Nutcracker](#)," which was filmed before the pandemic but provided one of the few bright spots of a holiday season spent under lockdown.

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Conceived especially for film by Bloodgood and artistic director Stephen Mills, the haunting "Preludes/Beginnings," is available for free via [Ballet Austin's website](#) through April 25. No doubt, both artists should create new works for this medium as often as possible.

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The basic concept is brilliant. Austin's [Scottish Rite Theater](#), built by German Texans in 1871 as a community clubhouse and gym, provided shelter for influenza patients in 1918-1919. During today's pandemic, the ghosts of those victims still float through the venue's ornate interiors, which for most of its existence was home to a Masonic lodge.

Here's the bonus: Early in the 20th century, the Masons acquired a full set of [wing-and-drop painted scenery](#) that not only survives, but closely matches the stock scenery that would have been used by a theater or dance troupe at the time. That means scenes of castles, forests, seashores, grottos and, perfect for "Preludes/Beginnings," ruins — in fact, several sets of ruins — and a church graveyard.

Perfect for phantasms.

Mills and Bloodgood chose Frédéric Chopin piano preludes to go with the dancing specters. This music loops back to their unforced influenza scenario, since Chopin remained quite popular during that decade. My paternal grandmother, for instance, who was a young adult during the 1910s, played Chopin records as she prepared dinner when I was a child in the 1960s. Although she told me adventure tales about London during World War I, I never thought to ask her about the 1918 influenza pandemic, probably because I'd never heard of it.

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But that's another story. Bloodgood and cameraman Jordan Moser shot the film as if it were an elegant horror movie — low angles, startle takes, creepy music, barely audible whispers, shaky point of view and a thick darkness that envelopes a "ghost light," the single bulb normally left lighted on a theater stage when it is empty.

Shrouded at times in loose, gauzy fabric, the dancers appeared mostly solo, one specter following another. Their serpentine movements and poses might seem unusual to someone who has not followed Mills' inventive dance-making over the decades. Yet they were charged with added electricity because the dancers rarely made physical contact.

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The one true duet, seen halfway through the film, packs an extra emotional punch. Mills knows what to do with bodies that are not objects to be arranged, but rather flesh and blood that belong to sentient beings.

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Something subtle that the film foregrounds are the stops and starts that punctuate Mills' near-constant stream of movement.

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The superb dancers wore masks, which works not only on the medical and historical levels — yes, they knew about masks, distancing, hand-washing and lockdowns more than 100 years ago — but also as a way to make these swirling beings more ghostly.

"Preludes/Beginnings" is not only one of the few cohesive new Austin creations I've seen during the pandemic, it is the finest, most elemental use I've witnessed of the Scottish Rite Theater over the course of almost four decades.

## How to watch

Watch "Preludes/Beginnings" for free through midnight on April 25 at [balletaustin.org/performances/preludes](http://balletaustin.org/performances/preludes).

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