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‘WHEN PEOPLE SUFFER, DON’T SLEEP’

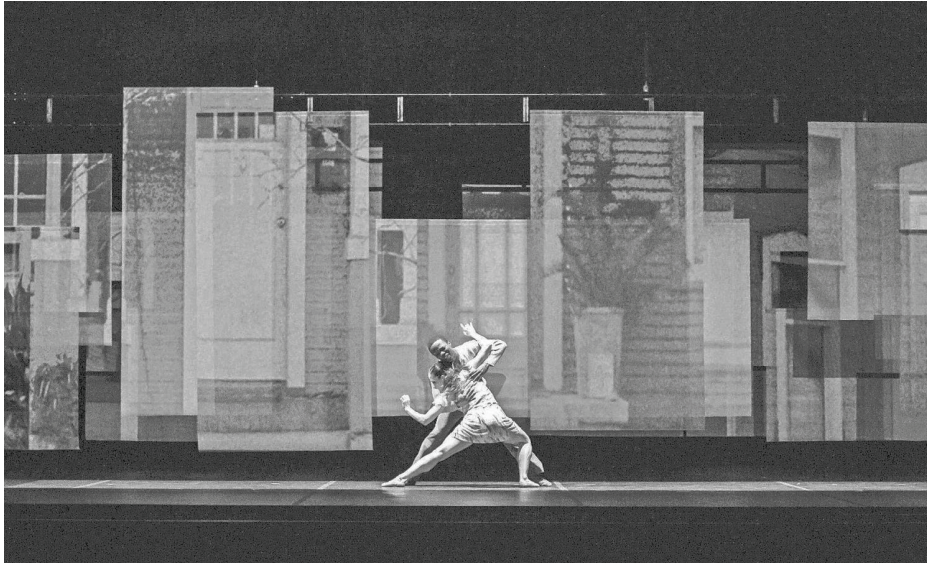
Ballet Austin’s ‘Light’ revives story of Holocaust survivor

Michael Barnes Austin American-Statesman | USA TODAY NETWORK

It might be the most consequential dance ever produced in Austin. • Respectfully and intentionally, “Light / The Holocaust & Humanity Project,” first staged by Ballet Austin in 2005, tackled a subject few thought could be turned into dance. • Artistic director Stephen Mills not only delivered a dark, dense, moving work that builds to a climax of hope, he continues to lead larger community discussions around the Holocaust and how it can be interpreted artistically. He has spread the word on this subject far and wide, from Israel to the United Nations. • From March 31 to April 2, Ballet Austin revives “Light” at the Long Center for the Performing Arts during a time of rising antisemitism and extremism, as well as attempts to erase the memory of some historical truths. • Mills thinks that current political atmosphere will alter the way people see it. **See BALLET, Page 4E**



The Holocaust is not a subject that dancers have typically tackled. “Light / The Holocaust & Humanity Project” did so in ways that first touched Austin audiences in 2005. It went on to do so in Israel, South Florida, Denver, Pittsburgh and Nashville. PROVIDED BY TONY SPIELBERG / BALLET AUSTIN



For the dancers, playing the part of "The Survivor" and other roles in "Light" can be emotionally wrenching. Dancers spend a good deal of prep time educating themselves on the Holocaust. PROVIDED BY TONY SPIELBERG / BALLET AUSTIN

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"Culture changes over time," Mills said during an interview at a South Austin coffee shop. "Since 2005, we've seen the rise of white supremacy. When you turn over rocks, all the snakes slither out. Now it's a badge of honor to be racist, homophobic and antisemitic as a way to show political bone fides."

Mills is particularly concerned that the Holocaust and other historical subjects are not taught in some schools because of concerns that the teaching of them has been politicized.

"You meet young people who haven't even come across the history of World War II and the Holocaust," he said. "Parents are trying to shield children from difficult knowledge. Can't talk about slavery. No LGBTQ. Take 'Anne Frank' out of the curriculum. It does a disservice to them."

A maturing dance community offers space for challenging work

"Light" not only took Austin by storm, it toured on two continents. Three American ballet companies — in Denver, Pittsburgh and Nashville — drafted Mills to set it on their dancers.

Ballet Austin brought it back to the Long Center to more acclaim in 2012.

Not only that, but the making of the dance is the subject of a probative documentary film, "Finding Light," that is now making its ways around the festival circuit.

Directed and edited by Paul Michael Bloodgood, a former Ballet Austin dancer and accomplished movie director, it has already won best documentary at the Berlin Indie Film Festival and the Rome International Movie Awards. It made its world premiere at the Miami Jewish Film Festival and earned a screening at the Cannes World Film Festival, where it won best historical film.

Yet "Light" did not appear as if out of thin air. By 2005, Austin's collaborative dance scene had evolved far enough that its main ballet company could take a chance on a tough subject thought nearly impossible to render as dance.

As early as the 1970s, for instance, Deborah Hay had created a whole new language for postmodern dance here. Recently, Hay was recognized with a full day of performances and talks, as well as exhibits and a documentary movie, presented by Texas Performing Arts and the Ransom Center at the University of Texas.

During the 1980s, Tapestry Dance, the city's sterling rhythm company, re-purposed populist dance styles in an ongoing effort fronted by Acia Gray. Those efforts are recognized around the world.

In this century, Forklift Danceworks, led by Allison Orr, broke out of the traditional stage house to produce site-specific works that were enriched at every step by direct community engagement and sustained social conscience.

Meantime, Blue Lapis Light, helmed by Sally Jacques, flung performers from every imaginable structure — high and low — in searing and beautiful dances in the air that grew out of Jacques' previous experiments with movement.

Mills, who joined Ballet Austin in



Ballet Austin premiered "Light / The Holocaust & Humanity Project" in 2005 and revived it here in 2012. It returns March 31-April 2 at the Long Center for the Performing Arts. PROVIDED BY TONY SPIELBERG / BALLET AUSTIN

'Light / The Holocaust & Humanity Project'

When: 8 p.m. March 31-April 1 and 3 p.m. April 2

Where: Long Center for the Performing Arts, 701 W Riverside Drive

Cost: \$15-\$99

Information: balletaustin.org, 512-476-2163

1994 as a dancer and was appointed artistic director in 2000, matched and sometimes exceeded all these achievements and amplified them with Ballet Austin's superb team of dancers, its ability to marshal large-scale spectacle, and its avid fan base that has helped ensure that the company could share local dances far and wide, including an extensive performance tour of China.

Mills and Ballet Austin had not shied away from serious subjects, but "Light" was different.

"I had been making ballets for 20 years," Mills says in the movie "Finding Light." "Then the events of 9/11 happened and it was devastating to me, because at that moment I think we realized the ways that hatred could manifest in really dangerous and catastrophic ways."

After 9/11, Mills struggled with his reasons for creating dance.

"What is the relevance of what I'm making?" he asked. "How am I to spend my time, and how am I helping my community? So I went on a search to find a deeper, more relevant way to communicate."

A friend suggest the topic of the Holocaust and introduced him to Naomi Warren, who lived in Houston and whose story of surviving several Nazi concentration camps during World War II eventually inspired "Light."

"I never imagined that I would be able to work in the arena of social justice," Mills said, "because of the limitations of the way people perceived ballet."



"Light" was based on the memories and feelings of Holocaust survivor Naomi Warren, who lived in Houston. She took an active part in the development of the dance. She died in 2016. PROVIDED BY BALLET AUSTIN

What audiences will experience during 'Light'

Mills' ballet is 84 minutes long with no intermission.

Right away, the viewer is introduced to "The Survivor," a stand-in for Warren, subsequently seen before, during and after the camps.

Warren, who died in 2016, was by her own account, recorded in Bloodgood's documentary, a somewhat spoiled, intelligent child of an emotionally warm, financially comfortable family in Warsaw, Poland. She was 19 and preparing to leave for college in England when war

broke out in 1939.

The Nazi-Soviet Pact allowed Germany and the U.S.S.R. to carve up Poland. Warren's family fell into the Russian sector until 1941, when the Germans attacked the Russians. Warren faced the loss of her family, home and culture as her father was sent to Siberia as a "captivity," and her mother, husband and other family were rounded up and transported to the camps in overstuffed cattle cars.

The experience was "absolutely indescribable" she told Bloodgood. "For me,

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it seemed to last a lifetime.”

When she and her relatives reached the infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, the guards separated families. Seeing what was happening to different sets of prisoners, Warren’s mother pushed her into a shorter line, knowing that they were in effect saying goodbye.

(This is one of the most wrenching scenes in the documentary, which is not yet available for widespread streaming.)

Warren was shifted around various campus until British troops liberated her and others at Bergen-Belsen on April 15, 1945.

Unlike the movie, the ballet dramatizes rather than narrates these facts of Warren’s life. Mills soaked up further background during a three-week tour of Eastern Europe and by talking to other Holocaust witnesses in Israel and elsewhere.

“It was a difficult journey and some of the most consequential learning of my life,” Mills said. “I spent a great deal of time with Naomi. And time in Israel. All along that path, I talked to survivors. Every story is singular but there’s a common strain.”

He next guided his artists through these stories. He told the dancers to think about the real people in these situations, not just the data points.

Among the lasting sensations from “Light” is the haunting music by Steve Reich, Evelyn Glennie, Michael Gordon, Arvo Pärt and Philip Glass. The sets, lights and costumes — especially during the camp scenes — create stark contrasts between darkness and light.

You don’t see the perpetrators. Instead, you see what happens to the dancers’ bodies and feel their experiences through their expressions, especially their eyes.

As for the wordless movement, one witnesses some scenes of panic and chaos, others of entangled bodies, crushed souls. Dancers throw themselves into the air and into each others arms. They run, follow and circle. They shake and crumple with intense physical and emotional trauma.

Yet the show ends to the strains of soft piano and violin music as dancers in sky-blue tights glide across the stage.

That final scene of partial peace might seem out of place, but it is crucial to the humanity of the project.

“Naomi said that the most important part of the work is that it should end with hope,” Mills said. “Because if she had no hope, she would have not have survived. For me, the last section is a way of honoring that wish from Naomi.”

What came out of ‘Light’

When it becomes widely available, the best way to understand the full impact of the ballet is to watch Bloodgood’s movie, “Finding Light.”

“Paul has a great eye for storytelling and he was in the original cast,” Mills said. “He knew Naomi. Not just Naomi’s story, but his own personal story informs the movie. That’s often what artists do best.”

The viewer of the movie primarily hears the voices and sees the faces of Warren and Mills, although a good number of scenes show rehearsals, discussions, audiences and travel. Bloodgood does not shy away from the devastating visual record of what the Allies discovered at the Nazi camps and what happened to the former prisoners afterward.

As for Mills, while preparing to make the ballet, he was aware constantly that he did not have Warren’s experiences. He is not Jewish and did not witness the horrors of the camps himself. Yet on a certain plane — as a gay man in the South — he could relate.



Movie director and former ballet dancer Paul Michael Bloodgood, right, has produced several works inspired by the ballets of Stephen Mills, left. PROVIDED

As the documentary explains, Mills grew up an artistic youth in a small Kentucky town. A town that was “not particularly tolerant in the ways they treated people not like themselves. Every day that I went to high school was torture. Every single day. ... I certainly can sympathize with being singled out.”

Early on a musician, Mills took his first ballet classes — late — at age 17. He was always interested in how things were put together, so he not just performed ballets, he put new ones together. Along the way, he was drawn to how stories are told more directly through modern or more recent dance styles, unlike the more rarified world of classical or neoclassical ballet.

Fans of Mills’ work have long admired how he can meld those different dance styles, and how he can coach dancers to perform difficult moves coupled with intense emotions. In the movie, one follows his coaching process with Austin dancers, as well as with those from the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, Colorado Ballet and Nashville Ballet casts.

Bloodgood’s film shows crucial footage of the Israel tour, which came during time of Palestinian unrest. Ballet Austin gave five performances in three cities, and while audiences reacted differently than in the U.S. — for instance, the blare of sirens in Israel carries a more precise warning than for most Americans — they were, on the whole, laudatory.

The movie also spends a good deal of time on Warren and Mills as public citizens and artistic activists, taking the story of “Light” to venues where artistic

treatment of the Holocaust is not a common subject.

“In some cases, it is very hard to read about it or to speak about it,” Warren told an audience at the United Nations in New York City about the Holocaust. “But I really think that art immediately puts the emphasis on what it meant and what it was.”

Warren helped Mills understand that telling her story through dance was not only possible, it was his duty.

“We’re all responsible to do our part,” he learned. “And just because I was an artist, I was not absolved of that responsibility.”

Before the 2005 premiere of “Light” at Bass Concert Hall, Nobel Prize laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel spoke to the gathered Austin audience. If anything, as shared in Bloodgood’s film, his words ring even more profoundly 18 years later.

“It’s possible for great events to occur and for us to sleep,” Wiesel said. “What does it teach us? To live through extraordinary times, tragic or celebratory, and not to be sensitive to them and to sleep?”

“Something is wrong with us. Not everyone can make history but it is given to all of us to take part in it. And this I believe is at least one simple lesson that we draw from our stories: When people suffer, don’t sleep.”

Michael Barnes writes about the people, places, culture and history of Austin and Texas. He can be reached at mbarnes@gannett.com.