

Dance



JIM WILSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Calling All Instruments of Change

In videos, the choreographer Alonzo King tells performers to play with the natural world.

By GIA KOURLAS

The choreographer Alonzo King has reached a point where he has no choice: He does what he does.

“You keep pushing out beauty, you keep pushing out truth,” he said in a phone interview. “Of course, it’s a challenge. This is a dark time, but it’s also a time of incredible possibility. Can you believe the world? Can you believe it?”

It hasn’t stopped this veteran dance artist from working. He has created an idyllic, almost mystical video dance — the first in a series of five — that seems to transcend the barrier of the screen.

Mr. King, the artistic director of Lines Ballet, a San Francisco company now in its 38th year, has spent a career delving into the connective power of dance and nature. Even with their moments of startling beauty, his ballets are never ornamental.

Part 1 of the video series, “There Is No Standing Still,” is otherworldly from the start. In her opening solo, Adj Cissoko, an elastic, elegant dancer, stands in the clearing of a forest and slowly unfolds her leg until it extends like an arrow toward the sky. Suddenly, she is a tree among trees.

“That was the whole point!” Mr. King said happily. “She became her environment.”

Using nature and the body, the videos are a poetic, poignant response to the times, from the coronavirus pandemic to the death of George Floyd in police custody.

“When the murder happened, everyone was like, ‘What are you guys going to say?’” Mr. King said. “I needed time, because I didn’t want to be like everyone else. And I also didn’t want to just do anything. I wanted to come from the heart. So for me, that meant, go back into the kitchen and cook.”

The series is a collaborative process. Mr. King works closely with Robert Rosenwasser, a founder and creative director of Lines, who directs the videos. (Part 1 is set to Edgar Meyer; Part 2, recently released, features music by Jason Moran, with whom Mr. King has collaborated in the past.)

For the videos, they gave the dancers assignments to explore different types of movement and asked them to pick a few possible locations.

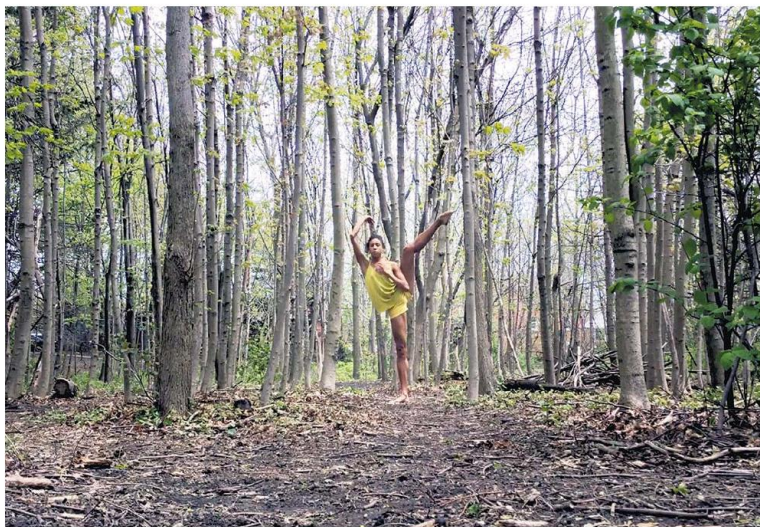
“When people are filming dance, so much of it is either fetishized or it’s sentimental or it’s archival,” Mr. King said. “You want something to have a living presence.”

In Part 1, which features 11 dancers, the striking backdrops include the beach, an arrangement of green picnic tables and a sun-dappled trail in a hilly field.

In each setting, the dancers perform with a mix of vulnerability and fortitude, their animating impulse coming from within. Nothing is on the surface.

“What’s the direction that you would hear from a director?” Mr. King said. “Get into it! And ‘Get into it’ means what? Drop your self-consciousness and plummet. It means that you’re not dancing for the king. You’re not performing for the czar. You’re not doing anything to get applause or recognition. You are tuning that instrument. I call it singing your song.”

Mr. King, who comes from a family of civil rights activists — his father, Slater King,



ALONZO KING LINES BALLET



ALONZO KING LINES BALLET

Top, Alonzo King, at home in San Francisco. “When people are filming dance,” he said, “so much of it is either fetishized or it’s sentimental or it’s archival. You want something to have a living presence.” Adj Cissoko, center, and Shuaib Elhassan, above, appear in Mr. King’s videos.

was the president of the Albany Movement — spoke about his theories of the classical form and nature, our ever-changing world and racial equality: There is, as he put it, “a turn in the bend” and “it’s not going back.”

What follows are edited excerpts from that conversation.

Nature is such an important part of your vision. How do you use it in your choreography here?

When you go in those locales, you don’t want to ignore them: You want to participate in them. There are many ideas that sound interesting, but then when you get there you go, “Oh no, no, we should do this.” And “Let’s use the wind instead of ignoring it.” So it’s really about being in the moment in time and place and listening.

So the choreographic process itself is not so different?

It’s really not. I often say I’m not really interested in my idea, I’m interested in bigger ideas. I’m interested in what we can tap into. People talk about mansplaining — we don’t want to choreograph that way. [Laughs] You want to listen and say, what is

potent here? What is being said in this environment?

It also makes me think about something the choreographer Steve Paxton said: “Solo dancing does not exist: A dancer dances with the floor.” In this work, nature is not only the partner, but also like another dancer.

The origin of classical form came from nature. This is what people don’t get. They think, Oh, let’s see: a pirouette. No! It existed in whirlpools and eddies and the way that the world turns on its axis and goes around the sun. So all of this is based in nature, and that’s why it’s always wonderful to go back to nature, because these are the true origins of this form.

What has being in isolation given you and what is it taken away?

I think isolation is a gift, because it forces you to look at yourself, so that you examine your life and you say, “Am I just floating willy-nilly?” It brings us to a wall where we say, I need to look and see if there’s any trace of the harm that I see in this world inside of me? Is there a thread, because I have to remove it. Before I point the finger at anyone else, I have to look at myself.

What do you think of the moment we’re in right now?

We’re seeing a universal therapist who’s saying: “No, these things have to change. You’re destroying Mother Earth.” The very facile statement that Rodney King made almost 30 years ago, “Can’t we just get along?” — and everyone laughed at it and made fun of it — but it’s the reality, isn’t it? To see someone else and think because they look different that they’re an alien? It seems to be life’s easiest conundrum. Oh, skin color doesn’t mean different.

What gives you hope?

I feel so encouraged by youth, because they’re not having it. They are saying, “We don’t want this antiquated look anymore.”

And the people who are out on the streets, it’s like, this is the real America. And the fact that it’s all over the world? It’s so inspiring. When people see injustice, when they visibly see it, it’s like, “No, this isn’t going to work.”

How did the death of George Floyd affect you?

I was born in Albany, Ga. My father was a civil-rights leader. There was joy in our family and privilege; he was a successful businessman, world-traveled. He introduced me to yoga. But you always heard stories about so-and-so who was killed. So-and-so who was lynched. So-and-so who was brutalized. When my stepmom was five months pregnant, the police beat her up [while she was visiting demonstrators, including Mr. King’s father, jailed in Camilla, Ga.], and she lost her baby. The interview afterward is on film. It was the first time I saw my father cry. The F.B.I. came to the house, and he said: “Get out of here! You all are the ones who did it. You are behind this.”

So this terror, this chain of black murders is the norm for black and brown people in the United States. When you’re accustomed to murder, when you’re accustomed to anti-blackness in all of its forms, you say, wow. Again. But this time there’s something different.

With the protests, there’s such a sense of urgency to fix things. Do you think that the ballet world — which is still very white — can change quickly?

You know, you can say ballet world, but it’s the world. Because it’s people who think a certain way in the world regardless of what profession they have. People can set laws. But real change comes from the heart, where you can look at another human being and identify with them.

And that is what’s happened here: People identified George Floyd and said, “That is me.” It’s that beauty of identification that if that person is oppressed, I’m oppressed. If I’m seeing injustice there, that’s injustice to me. I don’t think of ballet companies. I think of individual.

How do you feel when you see so many white dancers or artists, or anyone really, suddenly start to embrace Black Lives Matter?

I think that something profound is really happening, because we are moving into a higher age, and I think that there has to be a recognition that I’m black. Whatever color I am. That’s the real deep part — when will it be a time where any man wouldn’t mind being a woman? It wouldn’t matter. Do you get me?

When the world achieves a kind of oneness?

Yes! Where someone says, “OK, well, you’re going to be a woman.” You say, “Oh, that’s fine. I’ll still do my work.” Or “You’re going to be black?” “Oh, that’s fine.” Again, we’re fooled by skin color.

But to get back to your question, I’m an optimist, and I think that there’s a turn in the bend that it’s not going back. And I think that, in terms of war, in terms of materialism, in terms of religious sectarianism. That’s a rough one. And racism. Because these are all related. They’re all bound together.

What is the most important book anyone could read right now?

I would say “Autobiography of a Yogi” by Paramahansa Yogananda. It’s life-changing. It puts everything in perspective.