

BODIES

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How does a
dance company
create new work?
Is it unlike an
actor's process?
Our guest editor
Noma Dumezweni
watches the Alvin
Ailey company
rehearse, and
Marina Harss
listens in.

A whole new world... Ghrai DeVore and
Jeroboam Bozeman in *Members Don't Get Weary*
Photo: Paul Kolnik



It is a Friday in November, just a couple of weeks before the start of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater season in New York. Light streams through the floor-to-ceiling windows in one of the spacious dance studios at the company's gleaming headquarters in Hell's Kitchen. Noma Dumezweni, the British actor who for over three years starred as Hermione Granger in the play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, first in the West End, and then on Broadway, sits at the front of the studio, completely absorbed.

A rehearsal is led by Jamar Roberts, a longtime Ailey dancer who recently became the company's first choreographer-in-residence and is crafting a new work, *Ode*. At 6'4", Roberts is a commanding presence, but he has a quiet voice and a soft, sinuous way of moving, as if the air around him were slightly thick and warm. 'He's so lyrical and expressive, soft and light,' Dumezweni whispers to me as we watch him work, a touch of wonder in her voice. He shows the dancers a phrase of movement as he imagines it, his powerful back rolling forward and then arching into a beautiful curve, his arms reaching far, far into space. Every so often he pauses, asking, 'is that cool?' The question feels almost rhetorical – Roberts is sure of himself, of the images he sees inside his head and how they fit inside the music.

His instructions are extremely specific. 'I love that he knows exactly what he wants,' whispers Dumezweni. To explain a hand position at a particular moment, he explains to the dancers, 'it's like you're holding a bag of change as you're jumping.' The image is so precise, they get it right away. A moment later he explains, of another shape, 'this moment here, it's like when the women wave their fans in *Revelations*,' referencing Alvin Ailey's most famous and beloved work, from 1960. The dancers nod knowingly, aware of exactly what he means. They have a common language and a shared history. Which helps explain why earlier, when Dumezweni asked Roberts whether he felt the pressure of his new role in the company, he answered, calmly, 'you know, I feel very much in my element. I've been in enough rehearsal studios to see what does and doesn't work.' Ailey is his home, these are his friends and colleagues.

Ode is his second work for the company, after the elegiac *Members Don't Get Weary* (2017). The new piece is set to Don Pullen's *Suite (Sweet) Malcolm (Part 1 Memories and Gunshots)*, a jazz suite full of tricky rhythms and passages that sound almost atonal. In contrast *Members* was set to gorgeous, silver-toned Coltrane: Roberts has a strong affinity for jazz. As he shows movements in the studio, he often



vocalises along with the music, emphasising accents and dynamics. He knows the music inside and out. 'I'll listen to a piece every day for about a year, morning noon and night,' he says. Then, once he's in the studio, it just pours out of him: rhythms, melodies, pauses. Both of his works reflect the African-American experience, which is his experience. *Members* evoked physical labour as well as the emotional hardships of life, but also the possibility of spiritual uplift through love and beauty. The impulse for *Ode* is more immediate, springing from the continual barrage of stories in the news about shootings of unarmed black men. Not an easy subject for a dance.

Roberts decided to cast it with six men, all different in size and affect: 'I wanted to show male bodies onstage in a vulnerable way, thinking about the plight of the black man and who he's had to be in order to survive.' And yet the choreography is also quite abstract, infused with a deep lyricism, more of a poem than an exposé. 'There are three stanzas,' he explains. 'The first one is life, the second is death, and the last one is like the afterlife.' The dancers' movements and

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In their element... the Alvin Ailey company in *Ode* (left) and *Members Don't Get Weary*
Photos: Paul Kolnik

interactions evoke effort, prayer, consolation, loss, memory. At one point they touch the floor, as if paying tribute to someone who is no longer present. From the beginning, Roberts says, he decided to have a second cast, made up of six women: the results have surprised him. 'I didn't expect them to be so different,' he says. 'It wasn't so easy to get the men to embody the space and softness of the music.'

In the last 15 minutes of rehearsal, Roberts comes up with the ending for the piece. He places the six dancers of the male cast in a wave-like formation. At the front of the group, Chalvar Monteiro tilts forward, held up by the man behind. The next man holds the second man's shoulder, and on and on to the last man in the group. They form a kind of human caterpillar or a multi-armed *pietà*, slowly lowering Monteiro to the floor. Once he lies prone, each man detaches, one by one, leaving on a particular note in the score. Monteiro lies there, alone. The image takes everyone's breath away, and for a second, the studio goes silent. 'That was amazing,' Dumezweni whispers; the dancers break into applause. Something almost magical has happened. Meaning and movement have become inseparable.

Later, over lunch, Dumezweni and I discuss that moment, and the power of the body to express meaning. Roberts had told us that he came up with the image in the subway on his way to rehearsal, and that it had made him tear up. The rightness of it had left us all thoughtful. 'I'm just in awe of the human body,' Dumezweni told me. 'As an actor, if I don't believe your body, I don't believe your words. That's where the pressure lies. I just want to believe.' Dancers, with their hard-earned awareness of the body's capabilities, shapes and

sensations, are uniquely able to distill that emotion. That is, if they can get beyond technique and presentation and the mask of performance. 'Just be simple,' Roberts kept asking his dancers in rehearsal. What was big and bold became something more human, truer. 'I loved that,' says Dumezweni, 'and also how he brought a lovely lightness into the room. That is *really* important.'

Behind that lightness is a sense of confidence, but also of joy. For Roberts, dance has always been a source of solace and release. Growing up in the Goulds neighbourhood in Miami, 'my family circumstances, and therefore my personal circumstances, were bleak,' he remembers. He always loved to move. It wasn't until middle school, however, that he really immersed himself in dance, while attending a school for the performing arts where he had originally enrolled as a visual arts major. (He still draws, and designs the costumes for his dances.) But after watching a performance by dance students, to 'A Whole New World' from the musical *Aladdin*, he just knew *that* was what he was meant to do. 'They were wearing bluish purple dresses and sequins, and there was fog. It was literally, a whole new world to me,' he says. He switched to dance and met a teacher, Angel Fraser-Logan, who took him under her wing, and whom he credits with awakening him to the deep emotional truths that lie beneath the surface of dance. 'She made me feel safe to express the things I wanted to express,' he told the *New York Times* in 2017. In addition to her school, Dance Empire, he attended the New World School of the Arts in Miami and then the Ailey School in New York, joining the company in 2002.

Dumezweni too sees her life and career as a surprising series of events leading somewhere she never imagined she would be. Growing up in the UK as the daughter of South African refugees she had no idea she would one day win an Olivier award, or perform on Broadway. She didn't get into acting school, and, for a while, worked at a PR firm (and loved it). Acting came later. As one of her mentors told her, admiringly, she learned on the job. 'My story wasn't supposed to be ending up like



*'If I don't believe
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NOMA DUMEZWENI

'How do you wave a wand?'... Noma Dumezweni in performance and rehearsal for *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* and (below) Jamar Roberts Photos: Manual Harlan; Nicole Tintle



this,' she told me, still surprised by her own successes. In that discovery, as in Roberts' immersion in the world of dance, there is an immense sense of joy and freedom. She has also dipped her toe into directing, and will soon feature in a new HBO series, *Made for Love*.

Dumezweni's first directing project was *I See You*, a work by the young South African playwright Mongiwekhaya. When she directs, she told me, she likes to get up close to the actors, so she can experience what they're feeling. It's a way of absorbing and directing their energy, of figuring out what works and what doesn't, so she, and hopefully the audience, can believe in their characters. If their physicality is off, or tense, the energy doesn't come through. In this sense, she works almost like a choreographer. As Martha Graham said, the body doesn't lie. Similarly, when she's learning a new role, she needs to move. As the role gets into her body, so do the words. Though Hermione wasn't a dancing role, the entire cast of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* worked with a movement director, Steven Hoggett, to develop each character's movement signature. There was the question, for example, of how Hermione would handle her wizard wand. 'How do you wave a wand? What if I do it this way, or turn my body slightly? How does it look in the light?' All this was like a dance.



The truth is, she says, she has always loved dancing, though her formal training was limited to a year studying modern dance when she was about 11, at a local studio. The next year the family moved to a new town. Other interests took hold, but the love of dance never left her. It's something she has passed on to her daughter, Qeiva, who moved with her to New York when *Harry Potter* came to Broadway. For the past year Qeiva has been taking hip-hop classes, once a week, at the Alvin Ailey School. She had tried, and hated, tap and ballet. But after her very first class at Ailey with teacher Keith Alexander she came out beaming. Dumezweni delights in the joy and freedom dance has brought into her daughter's life: 'I love what it does for her.'