

A Protest Set to Banjo: Jamar Roberts's Dance for Hard Times

“We the People,” Roberts’s first dance for the Martha Graham Dance Company, finds the rage and resistance hidden in an upbeat score by Rhiannon Giddens.



By Brian Seibert

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“This isn’t fun.”

That’s what the choreographer Jamar Roberts told members of the Martha Graham Dance Company at a recent rehearsal of “We the People,” his first work for the troupe.

The anti-fun note was needed because the music suggested otherwise. “We the People” is set to rearranged songs from “You’re the One,” the latest and most playful album by the singer-songwriter Rhiannon Giddens. It’s rocking-chair porch music or accompaniment for a foot-stomping hoedown.

But Roberts’s dance, which will have its New York premiere on April 17 as part of the Graham company’s season at New York City Center, isn’t a hoedown. It’s a protest, dressed in denim. (The costumes are by Karen Young.) For much of the work, the dancers face the audience confrontationally, fists raised. They move fast and hard — as if “yelling at people,” as Roberts put it in an interview after the rehearsal.



Dancers in the Graham company rehearsing “We the People.” From left, Meagan King, Leslie Andrea Williams, Ane Arietta, So Young An and Anne Souder. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

In one sense, this attitude rubs against the tone and associations of the music. In another, that friction, like a bow across strings, brings out the pain, rage and resistance hidden within the sound. You might even say it brings to the surface what Alvin Ailey — in whose company Roberts was a dancer for nearly 20 years and resident choreographer from 2019 to 2022 — called “blood memories.”

An outcome of Roberts's artistic proclivities, this resurfacing is also, in an indirect way, what Janet Eilber, the Graham company's artistic director, had in mind. She said that the plan to pair Roberts with Giddens arose out of a possible revival of "Rodeo," a 1942 cowboy ballet by Agnes de Mille, a pathbreaking choreographer who was also a Graham acolyte and biographer. It includes tap and square dancing.

"We wanted to open the conversation about how the American vernacular dance in 'Rodeo' emerged out of immigrant and slave communities," she said.

Someone directed Eilber to Giddens, whose career has been largely devoted to uncovering and reclaiming the cross-cultural, Black-and-white roots of string band music and the Black history of the banjo. While pursuing that mission, she has earned a MacArthur fellowship, Grammy awards and a Pulitzer Prize (with Michael Abels for their opera, "Omar"). Recently the mission got a Beyoncé bump, through Giddens's contributions to the pop star's "Cowboy Carter" album, which has raised discussions about the Blackness of country music.



“I felt like he knew me,” Leslie Andrea Williams said of Roberts. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times



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Asked to reimagine Aaron Copland's genre-defining score for "Rodeo," Giddens suggested Gabe Witcher of the Punch Brothers instead. At City Center, his bluegrass band will play his rearrangement. Wanting a companion piece for this version, Eilber asked Roberts to use Giddens's music, similarly rearranged by Witcher, to make a work that would offer a more expansive and inclusive vision of America. The City Center season, which combines "Rodeo" and "We the People" — and starts the company's centennial celebrations two years early — is called "American Legacies."

Although he is a longtime fan of Giddens's music, Roberts said he had difficulty finding his way in. He kept getting caught up in the stories told in her lyrics, which are stripped away in Witcher's all-instrumental arrangement. "The songs for me were really light," he said. "I was trying to think of way to bring them down a little bit."

He came up with silent interludes. In the first, Leslie Andrea Williams alternates between lifting her chest so high that she might lift off and doubling over, deflating like a leaky balloon. In another, a phalanx of female dancers juts and stomps aggressively. In a third, Lloyd Knight stretches into a Black Power salute and curls into a ball. He sinks to the ground hinged at his knees, then lies prone with his hands behind his back, ready for handcuffs.



Roberts with the dancers. “It’s not that I’m against fun pieces,” he said. “But America is having a hard time right now.” Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

“It’s not that I’m against fun pieces,” Roberts said. “But America is having a hard time right now. As a Black gay man from a Southern Black family, it’s been really hard, for me and people like me, but so many stories besides my own became of great importance in the piece.”

Giddens said in a phone interview that she was amazed by the results: “It is really saying

so many of the things I wanted to say without even knowing that I wanted to say them.” “Another Wasted Life,” a song that Giddens wrote about Kalief Browder, who committed suicide after being imprisoned for three years without a trial, isn’t in “We the People,” but she feels the ghost of it in the dance.

“I tend to downplay my banjo tunes,” she said. “But there’s actually a lot in them. My sound on the 1850 replica minstrel banjo that I play is centered in pain as well as joy. There’s a story in the music, and Gabe and Jamar found it.”

“Rhiannon and I do the same kind of work,” Roberts said. “This excavation, making old things new, bringing hidden stories to light. We’re in the same tribe.”

Such excavation is in the Graham tradition, too, as Roberts knows. Although he comes from outside the Graham company, he was trained in her technique. One of his most important teachers was Peter London, who was a principal dancer with the Graham troupe. Roberts said that he sees himself more as a modern-dance choreographer, in the line of a Graham, than as a contemporary one following more recent trends.

“The Graham vocabulary has always been in my body,” he said, “and it’s always been in my work.”



Lloyd Knight, who is one of Roberts's best friends. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times



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“We the People” includes flashes of American vernacular dance, twisty footwork suitable for a barn dance, but as in Graham’s “Appalachian Spring,” these touches are transformed by a modern-dance approach. Contraction and release, the core of Graham technique, which she called a dramatization of breathing, is constitutional in “We the People.” At that recent rehearsal, though, it sometimes seemed as if Roberts had to teach the Graham dancers how to move with the right full-body attack.

“They’re so steeped in that tradition,” he said, “that when I come in and ask them to do something a little different” — alongside Graham-based movement, taken out of a Graham context — “it feels like their bodies get confused. We’re working on that.”

Roberts said that being a freelance choreographer — lately, he’s made work for the likes of New York City Ballet and San Francisco Ballet — can make him feel “ungrounded,” lacking a familiar language between himself and the dancers he’s hired to work with.

But he isn’t so far outside the Graham company. Knight is one of his best friends; they trained at the same Miami school as teenagers. And Alessio Crognale-Roberts, who does a solo during one of the silent interludes, is married to Roberts. (“I couldn’t not give him a solo,” Roberts said.)

“He represents the L.G.B.T.Q. community,” Roberts said of his husband’s role. “There is this struggle in his body between being liberated and having to conform.” Crognale-Roberts is also an immigrant from Italy, “hustling, trying to fulfill his dreams,” Roberts said. That’s in the solo, too.



Arietta, left, with Marzia Memoli. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

Williams and Knight, the other two soloists, are Black. Dancers in the Graham company are often typecast, Williams said, with Black dancers playing the powerful or sexy roles or maybe the mother figure. “I felt like he knew me,” she said of Roberts. “It felt so special to have someone see me for me, instead of fitting me into an archetype.”

Until recently, Black choreographers working for Graham have been scarce. One of the

only requests that Giddens made of Roberts, he said, was that he center Black dancers.

“It’s like, What is the purpose?” she said in her interview. “What kind of shock waves can this send out after it’s over? We’re trying to create systemic change, and if there’s an opportunity to foreground Black artists, we should take it.”

“That doesn’t mean that it has to be a quote-unquote Black story,” she continued.

“Actually, it’s better if it’s not.” What she liked about seeing Williams and Knight featured in “We the People,” she said, was that it just felt normal.

Noting that there has been a lot of performative diversity and inclusion lately, Giddens gave the Graham company credit for hiring artists, giving them support and staying out of their way.

“People are trying to mend ways that have been set in stone for a long time,” she said, calling for grace. “Jamar and I wanted to use this opportunity to make something that answers something in us, and we did.”

For Roberts the protest stance is a new direction, and it makes him nervous. “It’s so simple that it feels a little cringe,” he said. But he also thinks it might be potent. “It’s the start of a conversation,” he said.