

The Black Iris Project ~~Is Making Ballets By Black Artists, About Black Stories, For Black Audiences~~ ~~Forges Their Own Path through Ballet~~ ~~Is Making Ballets About Black Stories, By Black Artists, For Black Audiences~~

As a Black ~~male~~-ballet student, choreographer Jeremy McQueen never felt personally connected to story ballets, much less saw himself represented onstage. ~~Years H Later,~~ as a public school teaching artist for American Ballet Theatre and The Ailey School, McQueen witnessed widespread disinterest in ballet among his students from BIPOC communities. “Working with a diverse demographic, I saw more interest when I was able to connect ballet to their own lives,” says McQueen.

During the country’s ongoing battle for racial equality, ballet companies ~~have been~~ ~~are have been~~ called upon to increase commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion work within schools, companies, administrative staffs and boards. ~~But Rr~~ But rather than wait for fulfilling opportunities, McQueen founded his own collaborative, [The Black Iris Project](#), in 2016. ~~Like his inspirational predecessors Alvin Ailey and Arthur Mitchell, he strives to create a generative space for Black artists.~~ As McQueen states on the collective’s website, The Black Iris Project is “where Black lives become works of art.”

His 2018 solo, [A Mother’s Rite](#), ~~is~~ particularly resonant ~~ss~~ now, as it follows a mother’s grief after her son’s murder, drawing from ongoing police brutality. The film adaptation featuring Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater artist Courtney Celeste Spears received an Emmy Award nomination (~~watch it here~~ [blackirisproject.org/a-mothers-rite](#)). “I tell stories that outline the Black experience, something I had never seen in ballet ~~we are unapologetically Black,~~” says McQueen.

In addition to a revolving collaborative of Black ballet dancers from companies including ABT, Complexions Contemporary Ballet, Brooklyn Ballet, Dance Theatre of Harlem, Ballet Hispanico, New York City Ballet, LA Dance Project and San Francisco Ballet, McQueen works with Black lighting designers, playwrights, poets, costume designers, composers and visual artists. “I don’t create work for the white gaze, I create for my community so they can see their histories and lives reflected onstage. ~~Ww~~ We amplify voices historically left out,” explains McQueen. “It feels like many people think classical ballet should remain untouchable—like all the monuments coming down in our country—but the only way to involve a more diverse community is to shake up the entire experience.”

McQueen has become increasingly outspoken against institutional racism and microaggressions in the dance community, posting his ~~social media~~ “[Rockettes Revelation](#)” on June 5th (~~read it~~ [blackirisproject.org/news/2020/6/5/rockettes-revelation](#)), announcing his decision to cut professional ties with the organization due to their “public silence in support of Black lives” following the murder of George Floyd. ~~He~~ The choreographer He also acknowledges frustrations ~~during 2013~~ as the recipient of The Joffrey Ballet ~~of Chicago’s~~ 2013 “[Winning Works](#)” 2013 “Winning Works” Choreographers of Color award ~~[Winning Works]~~, citing minimal ~~true~~ mentorship or support. “If companies have diversity initiatives but few or no Black people on staff, it feels performative,” says McQueen.

McQueen's dedication to Black storytelling led him to research events like the unbelievable life story of anti-apartheid activist and first Black South African President, Nelson Mandela. To commemorate the anti-apartheid activist and first Black South African president Nelson the anti-apartheid activist and first Black South African president Nelson Mandela's posthumous 102nd birthday this Saturday, July 18, [BronxNet TV](#) will will televise the the Black Iris Project's BIP's Black Iris Project's ballet based on Mandela's life, [MADIBA](#). The one-act narrative ballet was choreographed by McQueen and features David Adrian Freeland Jr. as Mandela and Daphne M. Lee as Winnie Mandela, with an original composition by Black composer Carman Moore. The one-act narrative ballet was choreographed by McQueen and features David Adrian Freeland Jr. as Mandela and Daphne M. Lee as Winnie Mandela, with an original composition by Black composer Carman Moore. Originally performed at New York Live Arts for the collective's 2016 inaugural season, the ballet was [curated by Misty Copeland](#) during The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts 2017 Ballet Across America festival. "Along the way there were many people who doubted me, but when Misty took interest before anyone knew what The Black Iris Project was, it restored my faith," McQueen ~~says~~ ~~recalls~~ says. "We need people to take more chances on less guaranteed talent, **it often requires receiving big awards for companies, presenters, foundations and gatekeepers to give Black choreographers a chance.**"

The one-act narrative ballet *MADIBA* was choreographed by McQueen and features David Adrian Freeland Jr. as Mandela and Daphne M. Lee as Winnie Mandela, with an original composition by Black composer Carman Moore. "I live in the Bronx where there are primarily Black and brown people who were ravaged by COVID-19, so I wanted to create opportunities for my community to see this work first," McQueen says. The virtual performance will also be available on the company's website after this weekend:

*Go to [blackirisproject.org](http://blackirisproject.org) for MADIBA viewing details, and to learn more about The BIP.*

*Misty Copeland talking about MADIBA*

*[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apPjdJ\\_oltI&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apPjdJ_oltI&feature=emb_title)*

*MADIBA TRAILER: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ePdmmCgRio&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ePdmmCgRio&feature=emb_title)*





Photo Credit: David Adrian Freeland Jr. as Nelson Mandela in *MADIBA*, photographer Matthew Murphy



Photo Credit: Daphne M. Lee and David Adrian Freeland Jr. with The Black Iris Project, Photographer Matthew Murphy



Jeremy McQueen's Black Iris Project & Misty Copeland. Photo by Jack Vartoogian/  
FrontRowPhotos, courtesy of SummerStage. Costumes by Jermaine Terry.



Courtney Celeste Spears in *A Mother's Rite*. Photo by Matthew Murphy.





Jeremy McQueen's Black



Iris Project in *The Storm*. Photo by Whitney Brown.