



Here + Now | Audience Guide

March 24 - 27, 2022

In partnership with the August Wilson African
American Cultural Center | Pittsburgh

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR **SUSAN JAFFE**
PITTSBURGH BALLET THEATRE

Image: *SKIN + saltwater*, by Staycee Pearl. Artists: Grace Rookstool, Corey Bourbonniere. Photo: Duane Rieder

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The Production

Here + Now is a mixed repertory production, a term referring to a program made up of several relatively short, often abstract or plotless ballets. Mixed rep programs are an opportunity for a company to spotlight their artistic depth and technical range. This program centers on contemporary ballet, with two new works making their world premiere during performance weekend.

Here + Now also celebrates five distinctive female voices in ballet today: Aszure Barton, Gemma Bond, Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, Staycee Pearl and Helen Pickett. We are honored to present works by these acclaimed and innovative artists in PBT's first woman-led program since 1992.



Image: *Depuis le Jour*, by Gemma Bond. Artists: Devon Teuscher, Calvin Royal III; IPhoto: Rod Brayman

Program Order

The program is approximately 1 hour 30 minutes long with two 15-minute intermissions.

SKIN + saltwater, Staycee Pearl

Intermission

Depuis le Jour, Gemma Bond

La Pluie, Annabelle Lopez Ochoa

Three - 4, 6, 8, Helen Pickett

Intermission

Bright progressions, Aszure Barton

SKIN + saltwater



Choreography and Concept - Staycee Pearl
Music - Herman "Soy Sos" Pearl
Rehearsal Assistants - Jessica Marino, LaTrea Rembert
Costume Design - Janet Groom Campbell; built in the
PBT Costume Shop
Number of Dancers - 10
Length - 20 minutes
World Premiere - March 2022, Pittsburgh Ballet
Theatre

As they see their homeland disappear beyond the horizon, a young couple plunges into a magical aquatic existence. SKIN + saltwater imagines their love extending beyond time, brutality and worldly limitations. It begs the question: how does our humanity relate to the natural world and what affects that perception?

I am moved by literary and cinematic magical realism and often imagine fantastical alternatives for a variety of life's situations. I then give myself a moment to see the beauty and truth of our worldly condition. It is in that spirit that I imagine a mystical world below the sea –

a magical world where a future of certain bondage would certainly be avoided by simply escaping overboard into the ocean. With *SKIN & Saltwater*, I imagined a couple in love who decide to end their captivity and jump. They live eternally in a supernatural underwater world where they are free and embraced by pure and powerful love.

As *SKIN + saltwater* began to take shape, I considered culture, Blackness, otherness, woman-ness, and systems and concepts that have historically brought about violence and separation. This rumination got me thinking of the physical characteristics of skin and the truth about skin color and how it's evolved into not just division, but the birth of what some consider a superior class. The truth is, as humans there is more that makes us the same than makes us different. With *SKIN + saltwater*, we honor the sameness that makes us all human.

- Staycee Pearl

Artist: Corey Bourbonniere in rehearsal; Photo: Kitoko Chargois

The Music

The score for *SKIN + saltwater* uses innovative musical techniques to create a haunting and soulful throughline for the ballet. It was composed by sound engineer Herman "Soy Sos" Pearl, husband and creative partner of choreographer Staycee Pearl. The music and choreography were created simultaneously, with each consulting the other as their respective work took shape.

Pearl utilized a unique composition process that tapped the brilliant musicianship of the ten artists in the ensemble. The instrumentation itself is uncommon as well, with two musicians each on flute, bass and drums, one on organ and synthesizers and another on a Rhodes electric piano. Each of the musicians recorded their tracks alone in individual studio sessions with Pearl.

The process started with a centerpiece sound - Pearl's concept was that each musician would improvise their own musical response to that original sound, and the recordings of those responses would become the basis for the ballet score. He edited and mixed and layered the tracks on a digital audio workstation (DAW), building the composition first with the flutes, and then adding on drums, keyboard and bass. This layering effect, of different instruments and, in some moments, of multiple layers of the same instrument, creates the beautifully atmospheric and dreamy sound of the work.

Herman Pearl / Sound Designer

Herman Pearl (Soy Sos) is the head engineer and owner of Tuff Sound Recording, as well as the sound designer and co-founder of PearlArts Studios, a sound and creative movement company he formed with his wife, Staycee Pearl. Through PearlArts and SPdp&SS Herman creates soundscapes to serve as a component to contemporary dance. As a sound designer, Herman's repertoire includes a wide variety of projects and collaborators. His work has been featured in various independent films and documentaries, video games and advertisements. He has designed soundscapes for numerous choreographers, including Kyle Abraham, Donald Byrd and Sidra Bell. He has collaborated with many visual artists to create installations and touring exhibits. In addition, he has recorded and produced work for a plethora of recording artists across genres and techniques. Herman is also an artist; he has performed, created and recorded his own music for over 25 years. With DJ MKL, Herman created *3 Generations Walking* and MKL vs. Soy Sos, a deep, house music-centered collective that produced approximately 30 releases with worldwide distribution and acclaim between 1998 and 2006. In 1997 Pearl and longtime collaborator Christiane D, founded the band Soma Mestizo, which produced eight albums and performed over 500 shows. With reggae group Chill Factor International/CFI Massive, Pearl acted as co-founder, member, manager, and producer between 1986 and 1999, during which the band performed at nearly 1,000 engagements and released six records. He has produced immersive installations for art galleries. His full-scale sound installation, "Named/Unnamed," was featured at 937 Gallery for the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust and Three Rivers Arts Festival. He continues to develop live performance ensembles, remix projects and multimedia art installations, and is the primary sound collaborator with wife and creative partner Staycee Pearl.

The Costumes



During the ballet's creation in 2019 and 2020, choreographer Staycee Pearl and former PBT Costumier Janet Groom Campbell discussed, sampled and imagined the look for the ballet. What they came up with was an ensemble that feels organic, earthy and aquatic. The women wear leotards in tones of blue, green, teal and aqua. Each leotard is different, as they were individually hand-dyed to achieve a unique palette of watery colors. The sheer overdress took some trial and error: initially Campbell used a drapery chiffon, and though it flowed beautifully, she decided that it didn't provide the diaphanous

quality she and Pearl wanted. She experimented with a lightweight tulle, which is more sheer and has a tendency to fold over on itself in long layers that look almost tidal as they drift back and forth with the dancer's movement.

The overdresses are dyed in various skin tone shades, though the dyes are not matched to the individual dancer. The cuffs on the short sleeves (made from fabric the Costume Shop had on hand) are dyed to match the dress. The mens' costumes - stretch ponte pants and oversized, sleeveless, button-front chiffon shirts - are also dyed in different earthy shades, suggesting the beautiful color range of human skin.

Artist: Grace Rookstool / Photo: Duane Rieder

Choreographer Staycee Pearl



Pearl in rehearsal at PBT, 2020. Photo: Kitoko Chargois

After ten years studying and performing in New York City, Washington, DC, Philadelphia and Atlanta, Staycee R. Pearl graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a BFA and honors in Studio Arts/Africana Studies. In Pittsburgh, she served six years as Artistic Director of Xpressions Contemporary Dance Company, premiering numerous choreographic works and performing choreography by celebrated national artists such as Rennie Harris and Robert Battle. For the Opera Theater of Pittsburgh, Pearl choreographed Nathan Davis' jazz-opera, *Just Above My Head*, *Carmen Jones*, and *Lost in the Stars*. The STAYCEE PEARL dance project & Soy Sos (SPdp&SS) served as the Kelly Strayhorn Theater's resident dance company for the 2010-2013 seasons.

Pearl was honored with an August Wilson Center Artistic Fellowship in 2012, presenting *OCTAVIA*, a movement/multi-media installation based on the life and writings of famed science fiction writer, Octavia Butler. SPdp's 2012 evening-length piece, *...on being...*, an

investigation of race, gender and identity in relation to conversations around post-Blackness, remained on Creative Capital's national listing On Our Radar for one year. As a guest teaching artist and lecturer in the University of Pittsburgh's theater arts department, Staycee choreographed the acclaimed musical production, *In the Heights*. Her choreographic work has been consistently supported by the Heinz Endowments and The Pittsburgh Foundation since 2001. Most recently, Staycee and her collaborators successfully premiered *CIRCLES: going in* and *CIRCLES: reclamation* at the August Wilson African American Cultural Center in October of 2021. Both the stage performance and the gallery exhibition respectively were commissioned and presented by the Kelly Strayhorn Theater and the August Wilson Center. This represents the company's first National Dance Project and National Performance Network-supported project. In 2021, PearlArts was named one of Pittsburgh's Cultural Treasures by the Heinz Endowments and the Ford Foundation and its national partners on the America's Cultural Treasures Regional Challenge Initiative. The organizations chosen to receive a total of \$5.4 million were identified as leaders in producing work that centers and seeks to advance the people and culture of Black communities in southwestern Pennsylvania. The unrestricted grants range from \$150,000 to \$1 million. Ms Pearl is excited and honored to have won the Carol R. Brown Creative Achievement Award / Established Artist / 2021.

Depuis le Jour



Choreography - Gemma Bond
Music - Gustave Chapentier, Act III aria from *Louise*
Costume Design - Gemma Bond
Original Lighting Design: Serena Wong
Number of Dancers - 2
Length - 6 minutes 30 seconds
World Premiere - November 2012, Toronto, Erik Bruhn Prize competition

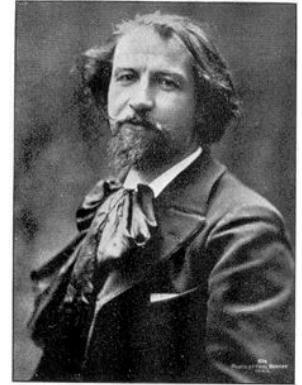
Depuis le Jour is the first work by Gemma Bond to enter PBT's repertoire. [Click here](#) to watch the ballet, performed by Devon Teuscher and Calvin Royal III of American Ballet Theatre.

Photo: Rod Brayman; Artists: Devon Teuscher, Calvin Royal III

The Music

Depuis le Jour is a pas de deux set to an aria from the opera *Louise* by Gustave Chapentier. The opera premiered in 1900 and today, though the full work is not a staple in opera company repertoires, this familiar aria is. The aria has been performed and recorded by many of the world's most famous sopranos, including the great Renée Fleming. [Listen here!](#)

Louise is notable because it is the first example of *verisimo*, or realism/naturalism, in French opera. *Verisimo* style originally emerged in Italian opera as a trend to focus subject matter and themes on the lives of everyday people.



In *Louise* the title character is a young dressmaker in Paris, torn between her devoted and hard-working parents and her new love, the free-spirited Julien. She ultimately chooses her lover, leaving her father in despair.

Louise sings the *Depuis le jour* aria at the opening of the third act. She's beginning her new life with Julien, and from their cottage, which overlooks the bohemian Montmartre area of the city, she sings about her happiness. Here's a loose translation of the lyrics:

Depuis le jour
Love is spreading its wings over me!
In the garden of my heart
sings a new joy!
Everything is vibrant
everything rejoices at my triumph!
All around me everything is smiling
light and joy!
And I'm trembling delightfully
from the charming memory
of the first day
of love!
What a beautiful life!
Oh! I'm so happy! ...utterly happy!
And I'm trembling delightfully
from the charming memory
of the first day
of love!

Photo: Gustave Chapentier, [Wikipedia.com](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustave_Chapentier)

The Costumes



The costumes for this pas de deux are cream-colored pants for one partner and an elegant dress for the other. The pants have structure at the waist and torso but also billow around the dancer's legs in a lovely way. The dress actually consists of a leotard and skirt, with the leotard ombre-dyed to match the skin tone of the dancer at the neckline. Below, the color transitions to what Costume Shop Manager Kristin McLain describes as a dusty lilac color. The skirt, in that same lilac, is a full circle and is unusually long, which means there's a lot of fabric in the skirt. The substantial weight of the fabric gives it a gorgeous flowing quality, enveloping the dancer in undulating waves when she turns and jumps.

Choreographer Gemma Bond designed the costumes for the ballet, and PBT Costume Shop staff recreated them through discussions with Bond and using a video of the

ballet as a guide.

Artist: Tommie Kesten; Photo: Duane Rieder

Choreographer Gemma Bond



Gemma Bond was born in Bedfordshire, England, and began her ballet training with Sylvia Bebb. She trained at the Royal Ballet School and joined The Royal Ballet, rising to the rank of first artist. From 2008 – 2019 she danced with American Ballet Theatre (ABT) in works ranging from Ashton to Balanchine and Morris to Tharp, and she created featured roles in works by Alexei Ratmansky and Liam Scarlett, among others.

Bond got her first taste of choreography at 13 when she competed in the Royal Ballet's Sir Kenneth MacMillan Choreographic Competition. From 2010 to the present, she has created works for American Ballet Theatre – both live and on film, NY City Center's Fall for Dance 2018, Atlanta Ballet, New York Theater Ballet, ABT Studio Company, Hamptons Dance Project, Intermezzo

Ballet Company, the Hartt School, the Joyce Theater, Ballet Sun Valley, the Washington Ballet, and three new ballets for ABT's Choreographic Institute. Her choreography has been performed at the prestigious Erik Bruhn Competition, the Youth America Grand Prix gala, the 92nd Street Y, The Joyce, Collage Dance Collective, and Jacob's Pillow. In 2014 she was awarded the fellowship grant from the New York Choreographic Institute (an affiliate of New York City Ballet). She has also received grants from the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation. Ms. Bond was a 2017-2018 New York City Center Choreography Fellow, the recipient of a 2017 Princess Grace Choreography Fellowship, the 2017 Clive Barnes Choreography Award winner, and was recognized in the 2020 Bessie Ceremony for Outstanding Breakout Choreographer. In the summer of 2019 she served as an Artistic Partnership Initiative Fellow at the Center for Ballet and the Arts at New York University and was in residence at the Vineyard Arts Project on Martha's Vineyard. She is currently creating a world premiere ballet for the National Ballet of Cuba. Ms. Bond has recently been appointed Kaatsbaan Ballet Intensive's Head of Choreographic Studies.

Photo: Jade Young

La Pluie

Choreography - Annabelle Lopez Ochoa

Music - J.S. Bach, Aria from *Goldberg Variations*

Costume and Lighting Design - Annabelle Lopez Ochoa

Number of Dancers - 2

Length - 4 minutes

World Premiere - 2005, in *Black Rain*, Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève

La Pluie (meaning "the rain" in French) is an evocative contemporary pas de deux with choreography that is angular, off-center and yet surprisingly fluid.

The duet was originally the closing section of a larger work called *Black Rain*, a ballet on the theme of war and peace. This closing section, wherein the dancers are dressed in simple, skin-toned attire, expresses that beyond all conflicts, the essence of humanity and human relations is the search for unity and love.

The dancers are in constant motion, swirling around and through one another. They are also nearly always touching - at times in complex partnering and at times in simple gestures - this

continual connection makes the movement elaborately interdependent, extremely challenging and profoundly beautiful.

[Watch *La Pluie*](#), with Iana Salenko, Staatsballett Berlin, and Daniil Simkin, American Ballet Theater and Staatsballett Berlin.

The Music

La Pluie is set to the Aria in *Goldberg Variations*. This beloved work for keyboard was composed by J.S. Bach and published in 1741. Named for Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, who may have been the first performer of the work, it has a simple, startling beauty. *Goldberg Variations* consists of the Aria, followed by 30 variations and an Aria da Capo, a repeat of the opening aria. It has been recorded many dozens of times by renowned pianists, as well as by musicians interpreting it with other instruments.

For *La Pluie*, the Aria is preceded in the performance by about 60 seconds of overtone singing, a deep, tonal humming sound created by a technique in which singers voice two notes at one time.

The Aria has been used in scores for film and television, perhaps most famously in the movie *The Silence of the Lambs*.

[Click here](#) to listen to the Aria performed by Glenn Gould.

The Costumes

The nearly nude costumes of *La Pluie* - simple, skin-toned bra-top, briefs and bike shorts - reveal every movement and muscle and enhance the stark beauty of the choreography. Choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa designed the costumes when the ballet premiered in 2005, and the PBT Costume Shop replicated the designs from photos and videos.

Annabelle Lopez Ochoa

Ochoa is truly a masterful choreographer with an edge for what dance can and should be in this constantly changing industry.

- Temecula Performing Arts Examiner

Belgian-Colombian Annabelle Lopez Ochoa is an award-winning and sought after choreographer who has created works for 70 dance companies around the world, including



the Dutch National Ballet, English National Ballet, Hong Kong Ballet, West Australian Ballet, Ballet Nacional de Cuba, San Francisco Ballet, New York City Ballet, Ballet Hispanico and Dance Theater of Harlem, among others. A versatile choreographer, Lopez Ochoa creates within the dance field but also for theater, opera, musical theater. Her wide-ranging body of work includes short conceptual pieces, full-length narrative ballets and dance films. In 2012, she was awarded UK Dance Award Best Classical choreography for *A Streetcar Named Desire*, created for Scottish Ballet. That

same year the work was nominated for an Olivier Award. In 2016, *Broken Wings*, choreographed for the English National Ballet, was nominated for numerous awards and reworked into a full-length ballet *Frida* for the Dutch National Ballet in 2020.

In 2019, Lopez Ochoa received the Jacob's Pillow Dance Award and became program director of the Jacob's Pillow Contemporary Ballet Summer Course. This year marks the premiere of her ninth narrative ballet, *Doña Peron*, for Ballet Hispanico.

Explore Lopez Ochoa's innovative movement aesthetic with these videos:

- Short film about [Guernica](#), a ballet created for San Francisco Ballet's *Unbound* series in 2016
- Trailer for [Broken Wings](#), a ballet based on the life of Frida Kahlo, created for English National Ballet in 2016

Three - 4,6,8

Choreography - Helen Pickett

Music - Philip Glass, "Knee Play 1" from *Einstein on the Beach*

Costume Design - Janet Groom Campbell; costumes built in the PBT Costume Shop

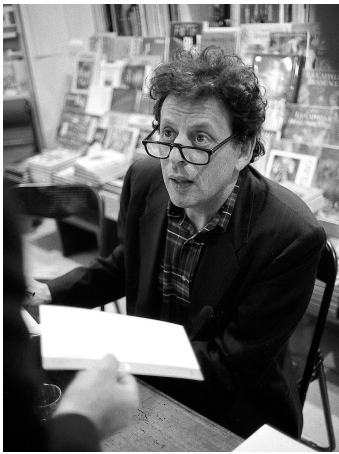
Number of dancers - 3

Length - 8 minutes 20 seconds

World premiere - August 2021, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, Ballet Under the Stars at Hartwood Acres

PBT Artistic Director Susan Jaffe commissioned award-winning choreographer Helen Pickett to create this delightful trio at PBT in 2021. It is a highly energized, architectural and kinetic contemporary dance for three men, with choreography that shows off each dancer's personality and technique. It's also a lighthearted take on competition - on the stage, in life - with the dancers in a fluid and humorous contest of one-upmanship. The movement palette is playful but it also includes beautiful moments of partnering and synchronicity, with the work ultimately embracing camaraderie and community - hallmarks of Pickett's work and style.

The Music



The music is from one of five interludes ("knee plays") that bookend and connect acts in the Philip Glass experimental opera, *Einstein on the Beach*. The knee play is for electric organ and chorus; the chorus chants a sequence of numbers throughout the piece. This vocalization of numbers references Einstein's mathematical genius - in the ballet it cleverly reminds us that dancing is so often about math and geometry and planes and calculations - the voices echo the familiar 8-count heard in dance studios across the world.

Glass created *Einstein on the Beach* with director and playwright Robert Wilson and choreographer Lucinda Childs, both known for pushing the boundaries of their art form. The work premiered in 1976 and was like no opera that had come before it: it clocks in at about 4.5 hours with no intermissions, but audiences are invited to come and go at will; it has no plot and is not linear, though there are scenes, acts and characters. A feeling of continuity and structure is facilitated by the knee plays - a term that alludes to the connecting function the knee joint plays. In addition to the recitation of numbers by the chorus, in "Knee Play 1" the chorus also voices solfège musical syllables (a method of applying syllables to the notes of the scale: think the "Do-Re-Mi" song from the *Sound of Music*), and a single speaker recites remnants of poetry.

Check out [Glass's website](#) for a bio and find a brief overview of the opera at [last.fm](#).

[Click here](#) to listen to "Knee Play 1" from *Einstein on the Beach*.

Photo: [Pasquale Salerno via Wikimedia](#)

The Costumes

The concept for the costumes for *Three* - 4,6,8 came from choreographer Helen Pickett; former PBT Costumier Janet Groom Campbell created the design. The dancers wear identical

charcoal-colored pants, black ballet shoes and a vest. The vests have a deep V-neck, buttons down the front (flat and decorative only) and points at the waist, like a traditional suit vest or waistcoat, creating a silhouette with a kind of workday, business vibe. But the vests are also a bit whimsical, made from a heavy stretch velvet fabric (not usually used in ballet costuming) in rich jewel tones, draping luxuriously with movement, and adding an unexpected beauty to the ensemble.

Choreographer Helen Pickett



Helen Pickett, native of San Diego, California, is an award-winning contemporary ballet choreographer. She has created over 50 ballets in 16 years in the U.S. and Europe, including *The Crucible*, a full-length for Scottish Ballet, which premiered at the Edinburgh International Festival. Pickett was resident choreographer for Atlanta Ballet, 2012 – 2017. In 2021, Pickett, the co-director for the Contemporary Program at Jacob's Pillow, choreographed for PBT as well as American Ballet Theatre, Boston Ballet, Kansas City Ballet, Jacob's Pillow and Cincinnati Ballet. Future commissions include The National Ballet of Canada, Boston Ballet and The Dutch National Ballet, which has commissioned a new full-length production.

During the Pandemic, starting in May 2020, Pickett launched her YouTube talk show, Creative Vitality Jam Sessions, and has completed 83 interviews. Watch her [interview with PBT Artistic Director Susan Jaffe!](#) From June - December 2020, Helen choreographed 12 dances for film resulting in two series: Homes Studies and The Shakespeare Cycle. Three films from *The Shakespeare Cycle* were featured in a PBS special. And a fourth, *The Air Before Me*, created with director Shaun Clarke was an official selection of the San Francisco Dance Film Festival 2021 and won the Audience Favorite Award from Screen Dance International. All were created virtually on Zoom. In April 2021, Pickett founded the Female Choreographer's Big Round Table, a Zoom meeting place for female choreographers - 140 women - to build community and forge avenues for more equitable work environments.

Pickett danced with Ballet Frankfurt under director William Forsythe from 1987-1998, and performed with the New York theater company Wooster Group, under director Elizabeth LeCompte, for five years. In addition to Pickett's contemporary ballet choreography, she has collaborated as a choreographer and actress with installation video artists and filmmakers,

including Eve Sussman, Toni Dove and Laurie Simmons.

Pickett is the co-director, along with Milton Meyers, of the Jacob's Pillow Contemporary Summer Dance School Program. She leads her think-tank dance workshop, Choreographic Essentials in universities around the country. She earned her MFA in 2011 from Hollins University and in 2016, Pickett received an Honorary Doctorate from University of North Carolina School for the Arts, awarded by then Dean of Dance Susan Jaffe, for her contribution to the arts.

Learn more about Pickett and her work at [her website](#).

Photo: Mihaela Bodlovic

Bright progressions



Choreography - Aszure Barton

Music - Sons of Kemet (see below for listing)

Costume Design - Michelle Jank; costumes built in the PBT Costume Shop

Number of dancers - 8

Length - 17 minutes, 30 seconds

World premiere - March 2022, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, August Wilson African American Cultural Center

A world premiere work for *Here + Now*, "Bright progressions" grew from what choreographer Aszure Barton describes as a "deep sense of wanting to make something bright and celebratory," "something that is positive, rhythmic, and regenerative." She started with fierce and funky and joyful music by the British band Sons of Kemet, whose sound is energized by jazz, hip hop, Caribbean and pan-African traditions. As creating began here in Pittsburgh the process embraced not only this fantastic sound palette but also the dancers - who poured their own steps and phrases into the work. For Barton, choreographing is about human connection and collaboration, about creating a space that allows dancers to contribute, to bring themselves forward, to make choices, to have agency. That respect and trust - built

together in the studio - translates to what one dancer called a sense of freedom and self-confidence on stage, and ultimately to a connection with the audience that is less that of performer and audience, and more an experience of shared humanity. *Bright progressions* is sponsored by Elizabeth B. Yntema in support of female leadership and creativity in ballet.

Artists: Aszure Barton (seated), Victoria Watford, Tommie Kesten, Diana Yohe, Corey Bourbonniere. Photo: Aviana Adams

The Music

*... I want everyone in the room being so connected to that jubilant feeling of really just enjoying the celebration of music. That's what I'm trying to get with [our] performances, the situation where every single person in that room can feel this energy that brings us all together. And once we are together, for me that's when the transcendence can happen.***

- Shabaka Hutchings

The music for *Bright progressions* is a selection of works by British jazz band Sons of Kemet. Led by saxophonist Shabaka Hutchings, the ensemble (sax, tuba, and two drummers) formed in 2011 and has released four albums. Kemet is an ancient name for Egypt, translated as "black land," and thought to refer to the fertile soils of the flood plains along the Nile River.

The band's sound is described as "eloquent, fierce, explosively funky and thrillingly out-there."* Jazz, hip hop, Caribbean and pan-African music feed through and energize the sound, though Hutchings describes treating those genres with "irreverence" and from a perspective of reevaluating, reinterpreting, and decontextualizing musical categories.**

The first two pieces in the ballet come from the 2015 album *Lest We Forget What We Came Here to Do* - Hutchings' reflection on Caribbean immigrant life in England and "what it means to be a Black person in Britain now."** The third piece, "To Never Forget the Source," is from last year's album, *Black to the Future*, a response to the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and U.S. and worldwide protests and upheaval. "To Never Forget" is an invocation of the unifying and healing principles found in traditional African cosmologies to "realize a better future for humanity."***



Bright progressions closes with "My Queen is Anna Julia Cooper," a track on *Your Queen is a Reptile*, 2018. The album honors Black female historical figures, including Harriet Tubman, Angela Davis and more. Anna Julia Cooper was born enslaved on a North Carolina plantation; after the Civil War she became an educator and civil rights advocate. She was one of the first Black scholars to earn a Ph.D. and is considered the

mother of Black feminism. The album title skewers the concept of hereditary monarchy, asking listeners to consider the absurdity that lineage alone should determine who governs in some societies.

Listen to the Sons of Kemet pieces in *Bright progressions* here:

[“The Hour of Judgement”](#) from *Lest We Forget What We Came Here to Do*, by Shabaka Hutchings

[“Mo’ Wiser”](#) from *Lest We Forget What We Came Here to Do*, by Shabaka Hutchings

[“To Never Forget the Source”](#) from *Black to the Future*, by Shabaka Hutchings, Theon Cross, Thomas Skinner, Edward Hick

[“My Queen is Anna Julia Cooper”](#) from *Your Queen is a Reptile*, by Shabaka Hutchings, Theon Cross, Sebastien Rochford, Thomas Skinner, Peter Warehem

Go see them in person! Sons of Kemet are [touring the U.S.](#) in close-by cities in the mid-Atlantic in March 2022.

*[last.fm](#); **[Shabakahutchings.com](#); ***[knkx.org](#)
Photo: Anna Julia Cooper, [wikepeida.com](#)

The Costumes

I love the change of view, the change of energy and the change of intention with fabric. In [the fashion] world it is about the commerciality of the fabric, in the [dance world] it's about the emotion.
-Michelle Jank*

Bright progressions costume designer Michelle Jank is a renowned creative in the worlds of film, fashion, jewelry, costume and theatrical design, show production and styling. She first worked with choreographer Aszure Barton in 2007 and since then they’ve collaborated on multiple projects.

At this writing the costumes are still in the design and build process, but we do know they will be unitard style, with long pants and sleeves and a high neckline. The fabric will be a lycra stretch fabric in different colors for each of the ten dancers. PBT Costume Shop Manager Kristin McLain has worked with Jank to find the fabric that fits Barton’s and Jank’s vision for the work, something that is iridescent, that “glistens like glass or water.” McLain will oversee the build in the Costume Shop.

Read more about Ms. Jank’s career [here](#).
[*ballet.org.uk](#)

Choreographer Azure Barton



Artist and choreographer Azure Barton has collaborated with celebrated dancers and companies including Mikhail Baryshnikov, Misty Copeland, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, American Ballet Theatre, English National Ballet, Martha Graham Dance Company, National Ballet of Canada, Nederlands Dans Theater, Sydney Dance Company and Teatro alla Scala, among many others. She is a Bessie Award Honoree and has received numerous honors including the prestigious Arts & Letters Award, joining the ranks of Oscar Peterson, Karen Kain and Margaret Atwood. She was the first Martha Duffy resident artist at the Baryshnikov Arts Center and is an official ambassador of contemporary

dance in Canada. She is the founder of Azure Barton & Artists, an interdisciplinary international dance project.

More information about Barton's work can be found on [her website](#).

Photo: Graeme Mitchell

Excerpts from an interview with Azure Barton

In December 2021, PBT Director of Marketing Denise Mosley (DM) spoke with Barton (AB) about creating *Bright progressions* and how she works with dancers.

DM: Tell us a little bit about the work you're doing for us for *Here + Now*, tell us what the concept is, what the situation is.

AB: I was really, really happy to hear that Susan Jaffe was brought into the company and was delighted to receive her lovely invitation to collaborate. I felt a deep sense of wanting to make something bright and celebratory for the company, something positive, rhythmic, and regenerative. Once the project was confirmed I started gathering some music possibilities and am oh so happy with what I chose! I absolutely love Sons of Kemet.

DM: You were telling me the other day that choreographing for you is kind of a spiritual experience. Can you talk a little bit about that?

AB: Dance is my language and means of communicating, and it is through music that I connect with the sacred. Making dance is a spiritual experience and place for me. I find that without it I am far less grounded and it is the thing that excites me the most and connects me to something much bigger than myself. I've always felt this way. And this together with the connection with other human beings is really powerful. The last two years have totally reinforced why I do what I do. . . . I realized how vital a part of my life dance is, and how the human heart-to-heart connection I get to experience is an absolute privilege. To be able to facilitate a place where people can grow and embrace who they are is a great gift and if I can create a space where we can create something beautiful together, this is really the best thing. I'm very lucky that this is my life's work.

DM: I like that you describe that human connection, that creative space, as a lifeblood.

AB: 100 percent. I'm not interested in simply scraping the surface. What I am interested in is building relationships, creating a space where trust is front and center, where dancers are actually wanting to make choices, not apologizing for who they are, bringing themselves into the process. And that takes time and patience to go deep. After spending several weeks with the dancers I feel like they're trusting me and themselves more, they're making choices and they're not apologizing as much. In ballet it's so easy to be quiet - we're often being told to submit and this is something that I feel needs to change. We are actively working on this in my process, bringing ourselves forward and making deliberate choices.

DM: There's an empowerment that happens there.

AB: Hopefully! I hope that through the process we all feel safe to mess up. My work is not about perfection, I find that uninteresting. It is about opening ourselves up, being honest, taking risk and feeling free.

DM: Why do you think that that message, that opening up, that self-acceptance, without apologizing, and in the midst of celebration, is an important concept for audiences to embrace?

AB: I hope they connect to the humanity in that. Life is short so we might as well have fun! I think that if we can create a work that is breaking down that third wall and really connect with

an audience then that's magic! I hope the audience feels joy. I hope the audience appreciates the dancers and the music, enjoys themselves, and feels happy. It really is that simple.

Excerpts from a conversation with PBT Dancer Victoria Watford on *Bright progressions*, with PBT Director of Marketing Denise Mosley

On how it feels to be back performing again at the August Wilson Center:

There's so many things, I think it's really, really nice to be back at August Wilson Center. For me it's just the connection to August Wilson himself, a connection to the Black community in Pittsburgh and to more contemporary movement and contemporary ballet, and to just moving forward in the dance world. And working with Aszure has been incredible. It's so, so wonderful to be part of a new creation. That has not happened for me in the company as much. Getting to be in such a collaborative place is just so fresh and exciting.

I think [the audience] can expect to see a freedom and a self-confidence that is really hard to get to in ballet, especially as a Black girl or guy. It's really hard to find that confidence, and Aszure has just been so inspiring and wonderful in making us all - no matter what you look like - feel like you can be yourself. And it's really nice to have that from her, and then to have that in such a wonderful space, especially since in the past we've performed with Dance Theatre of Harlem there. I just feel very connected to that space in a free way - in a personal way.

On what the audience will experience seeing *Bright progressions*:

I think they will feel a lot of excitement, I think maybe emotions they didn't know they would feel seeing ballet. Especially something like this because we're creating more of a collaborative feel and more of an individuality, and more becoming yourself in the movement versus becoming a different person. So it's just very fresh. And there's an energetic feeling to it, there's a sensuality to it that you don't see very much in ballet . . .

I hope the audience understands the love and joy that we've put into it. And I hope that they leave feeling inspired and energized and groovy, because it's a really groovy, fun piece that you can dance along to. And it will be really exciting for people to leave the theater and feel like, "I wanted to get up and dance with them!"

On advice for young Black dancers:

I think the biggest thing I can say is to be yourself and find yourself in ballet. Don't find ballet making room for you, you make room for ballet and you make ballet see you. And don't change you for it because you don't need to anymore. We're past that now, which is really wonderful, and I think it's so inspiring to young dancers, young artists in general.

On being part of the creative process with Aszure Barton:

I just have to say again how grateful I am for Aszure and this experience, and of being a part of the creation, and everyone being a part of it. When we first came in and started working with her, she had us all come up with three steps that really show you and show how you feel, and that best describe you as a person. And all of those steps are in this piece and it's morphed into something we never knew it would be. But it's so inspiring . . . it really brings an individuality to it and it brings this collaborative feeling, where we all worked to make this and we're feeding off of each other in a way. And it's something I've never done before, which is awesome. I'm so excited for everyone to come and enjoy it.

Theater Programs

Join us online or at the theater to learn more about the production!

Educational programs at the theater are subject to change as Covid regulations are updated through the year. Thank you so much for your patience and understanding.

Virtual Preview | Monday, March 21 | 7 p.m.

Preview of the performance with choreographers Staycee Pearl and Helen Pickett. Live on Zoom! [Register here](#) - you'll receive a Zoom link by email.

Director's Cut | Thursday, March 24 | 6:30 p.m.

Join us on opening night to speak with choreographers Helen Pickett and Staycee Pearl. Registration requested – please [click here](#) to sign up!

Post-Show Q&A | Friday, March 25 | 9 p.m.

PBT dancers join us after the performance to take your questions! No registration necessary –

just stay in the theater after the show. Feel free to move up to the front near the stage.

ViewPointe | Saturday, March 26 | 6:30 p.m.

A look at the choreographic process with choreographer Helen Pickett - please [click here](#) to sign up!

Audio-described Performance | Sunday, March 27 | 2 p.m.

Live narration of the production for patrons with blindness or low vision, or anyone interested in listening to a verbal description of the production. Visit Guest Services before the show for assistance.

Accessibility

We believe dance is for everyone! Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre is committed to including everyone from our greater Pittsburgh community and beyond in the beauty, discipline, and creativity of dance. We strive to make our company, school and art form accessible to talented and committed students and families.

Theater Accessibility Services

Audio-described Performance | Sunday, March 27 | 2 p.m.

Live narration of the production for patrons with blindness or low vision, or anyone interested in listening to a verbal description of the production. Visit Guest Services before the show for assistance.

Wheelchair accessibility: The Benedum Center for the Performing Arts and the August Wilson African American Cultural Center features elevators, accessible restrooms and companion seating (available only on the main floor of the theater). Guide dogs are permitted; please inquire when purchasing tickets. Please inform your ticketing representative when purchasing to take advantage of wheelchair and companion seating.

Braille and Large Print Programs: With assistance from the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children Outreach/Braille Project, PBT makes printed Braille programs available at the Benedum Center for patrons who are visually impaired. Large-print programs also will be available. Please see an usher or visit Guest Services for a program.

Assistive Listening Devices: Assistive listening devices are available at the Benedum Center for Performing Arts and the August Wilson African American Cultural Center for patrons who desire amplification. Neck loops are available. Please visit Guest Services at the theater to obtain an Assistive Listening Device, which are available on a first-come, first-served basis.

Sign language interpretation may be available for performances that use music with lyrics and educational programs only upon request. We kindly request at least two weeks advance notice before the performance or program dates to ensure that we are able to secure interpreters.

Sensory-Friendly Performances: PBT is proud to present a sensory-friendly performance once each year. [Learn more here.](#)

Studio Accessibility

Dance for Parkinson's: This program, based on the Dance for PD® program, invites people with Parkinson's, their families, caregivers, and friends, to become participants in the dance process! [Learn more here.](#)

Adaptive Dance: Themed around classic story ballets, our adaptive dance classes are designed for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders or other sensory sensitivities. We emphasize creative movement principles and simplified ballet technique within a welcoming and structured studio environment. [Learn more here.](#)

Children's Scholarship Program: This program aims to expose more children to dance at an early age by funding need-based scholarships for talented and committed students from ages 5-9. [Learn more here.](#)

PBT in the Community: PBT's education team brings ballet into neighborhoods, schools and community centers in an effort to engage and inspire more people with the mind-body benefits of ballet and movement. [Learn more here.](#)