



THE BLACK IRIS PROJECT

Select Press

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SUMMER ARTS GUIDE

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DANCE
DANCE
EVOLUTION

Catch NYC's Black Iris Project at SummerStage, June 29



An impressive
collective:
Nardia Boodoo
and Daphne
Lee of Black Iris

Stylist: Ise White. Hair: Stacey Ciceron. Makeup: Miyako J.

Black Iris Project

Black Iris Project soars into its debut season with a plan to buck ballet's entrenched traditions

BY RAJUL PUNJABI
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
JILL GREENBERG

IT'S A BUSTLING Saturday afternoon at the Harlem School of the Arts. Sunlight filters through the floor-to-ceiling windows into the main performance space and energizes the children, who squirm impatiently in the audience, the little ones standing on their seats for optimal viewing. "Sit still, they're about to start," one mother says, and her toddler son acquiesces as dancers Stephanie Rae Williams and Da'Von Doane take the stage.

There's a tender familiarity between them as their movements tell the captivating, fraught story of a white woman and a black man in love in 1940s Munich. Williams leans in, arches away, and rises, her *relevés* coquettish. Doane feeds off her energy and counters it with confidence.

The two dancers belong to a ballet collaborative called Black Iris Project, which aims to create and perform pieces that tell stories about black history and culture. "What we know of classical ballets are usually rooted in European tradition — ballet [typically tells a] story — so classical ballets are usually *Cin-*

derella, Sleeping Beauty, Swan Lake," Jeremy McQueen, the project's founder and creative director, tells *the Voice*. "We wanted to take [all] that and turn it upside down and bring some black perspectives into it."

Brown Baby, the ballet the Harlem event previewed — set to be performed in full in July for the project's debut season at New York Live Arts — is a perfect example. The piece, co-choreographed by McQueen and Lauren Cox, the granddaughter of pioneering black fashion model Beatrice Reynolds Cox, tells the poignant tale of how Beatrice's parents met, commenting along the way on racism, colorism, love, and loss. (The title is a term once used to refer to children born to black soldiers and white European women during and after World War II.) "That story of love is timeless," says Williams. "Whether it's in the Twenties or Fifties or now, it usually works the same way."

Timeless, sure, but also specific in its point of view. McQueen has had a lot of time to think about how best to tell such stories. The San Diego native, thirty, has trained at Fordham's Ailey School and choreographed for the Joffrey Academy of Dance and Harvard Ballet Company, gathering accolades as he went. He also works as a dance instructor — and notices a lack of diversity in every dance space he enters, from the most prestigious ballet companies to small teaching studios.

Out of those observations arose Black Iris. While the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater has set the standard for black dancers and cultural expression in New York and nationally, Black Iris focuses solely on ballet. It's also intentionally designed as a collaborative rather than a company, which means its members join forces as a community but still belong to other companies.

"The black dancers in these companies all over the country — it's important for them to stay where they are, because if they don't clear the way for themselves in that company, who knows how long it's going to take for another black dancer to grace the ranks of those companies?" says McQueen. He points out that American Ballet Theatre's Misty Copeland is the first black female principal dancer in the company's nearly eighty-year history. Her "tenacity and steadfast faith," he says, served as catalysts for his own mission to bring black ballet dancers together.

The artists he's assembled — for both their onstage and offstage talents — are an impressive bunch. Doane performs with the Dance Theatre of Harlem, and Cox has danced with Pharrell and Alicia Keys. Nardia Boodoo has trained at the Joffrey Ballet in Chicago, and Kimberly Braylock-Olivier — who will be the lead ballerina in the collective's SummerStage performance of its eponymous piece — has been a fixture at the San Francisco Ballet since 2010. Referring to Copeland's breakthrough and the legendary Ailey's ability to turn his experiences in the black church or with the civil rights struggle into powerful performances, McQueen says, "We're following in

Da'Von Doane and
Boodoo. Right:
Choreographer
Jeremy McQueen



that tradition. What makes it contemporary are really just the contemporary voices that we're bringing to the table."

Those voices will have a chance to shine in *Madiba*, a new ballet about Nelson Mandela's life that will also debut this summer. McQueen, who choreographed it, calls it "a beautiful, powerful message" that will resonate with young people confronting police brutality and racism today. He pauses before noting, "It's almost like we're repeating a cycle."

To make sure that message reaches the right audience, *Black Iris* is putting on

several summer performances — like the one at Harlem School of the Arts — aimed at young black ballet dancers who might lack the support and context they need for their journeys.

"Hopefully there will be more opportunities for young dancers of color to not have to necessarily step outside of themselves," Doane says. "They'll be comfortable in their own skin onstage and it will be authentic." Williams puts it a different way: "We want people to leave seeing us thinking about it the next day and the next day after that...."

You want something to stick. We want to keep coming back to them."

And it's key to McQueen that these absorbing moments happen in real life. "One of my favorite things to do when I go in to see a dance performance is to be able to hear the dancers breathe," he says. "I love that because it lets me know that someone else is going through something.... It's a living, breathing human being that's having an experience, and I think that's something that gets lost between watching YouTube and Vimeo and Instagram."

Harlem School of the Arts' president, Eric Pryor, sees young dancers in the community come alive when they watch these performers onstage. "Anytime professional-level artists can go and make themselves accessible to the next crop, the next generation, it's huge," he says. "Ultimately, I think understanding oftentimes is about experience and seeing others who you can emulate."

After Doane and Williams finish performing, classes resume in the studios. A lithe, sprightly ten-year-old girl named Aliyah perches on a stool in a white leotard as her mother pins her hair back into an immaculate bun. Aliyah compares Williams to the now ubiquitous Copeland. "I want to be like that, so I think about their footsteps, who they are, what they do," she says. "It's kind of scary, but it's fun at the same time. Like, at first you think, 'Ooh, that's really hard to do' — and when you get the hang of it, you're like, 'I can do this.'"

Reflections like that are what fuel McQueen and his cohort. "I'm not a freedom fighter. I'm not that type of person that you will see walking down the street holding a picket sign. I don't even like crowds," he says. "But I believe I protest in my own way through creating works of art that amplify not only my own state of being, but also amplify our range of what we can say."

Black Iris Project opens for a screening of the *Misty Copeland* documentary, *A Ballerina's Tale*, at Central Park's SummerStage on June 29. It launches its debut season at New York Live Arts on July 27 and 28.

ELLE



ALAN WINSLOW

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN BALLET PUTS BLACK LIVES AT ITS CENTER

A revelation in dance.

BY KAITLYN GREENIDGE AUG 9, 2016

This past year, "the black body" has become a [refrain](#) for a certain type of urban intellectual. The term originated with scholars—a way to describe a trope that appears again and again in the images we create and see. Whenever I read the phrase, I always heard it in the low, angry howls of Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, singing that putrid line in "Strange Fruit." But as this year of death and surveillance marched on, I began to hear and see others using it. People debated on social media about whether they should post images of police shootings. They decried the New York Daily News, which chose to print a graphic picture of Alton Sterling's body the day after he was murdered. "I can't see any more mutilated black bodies" they said. And I thought, They are right.

To have a black body in America almost always means that you have a problem. Your body is, according to the dominant narratives, not right. You are subhuman and superhuman all at once. Capable of extraordinary athletic feats, of breaking records without breaking a sweat. While also capable, we are told over and over again, of growing too big, too fat, too sick, too diseased.

Most black women of my age, if they took ballet as little girls, have a story of being told they were too much. "Tuck your backside in," was the admonishment in my dance class when I was young, a command I couldn't understand. Wasn't it clear it was tucked as far as it could go? "They always tell the black girls to do that. They just don't understand our behinds," my sisters said with a laugh, and the momentary shame I felt about not being able to tuck in, was dispelled by my sisters' dismissal of the whole concept. Tucking in, I thought confidently, is impossible. And I promptly gave up ballet with no regrets.

**"TO HAVE A BLACK BODY IN AMERICA ALMOST ALWAYS
MEANS THAT YOU HAVE A PROBLEM."**

It's a revelation, then, to watch the dancers of the newly-formed Black Iris Project, which bills itself as a "ballet collaborative that champions new Black-centric works and arts education." Here, the black body is not in pain; it is not a problem to be solved. It is celebrated. In *Madiba*, one of the collaborative's signature ballets, the life of Nelson Mandela is elegantly dramatized in 22 minutes. At a preview performance at the Schomburg Library for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, I watch two young dancers, a man and a woman, perform the love story of Nelson and Winnie Mandela. The man lifts the woman, curves himself to her back, arcs one hand out to her, longingly, with pleasure. I know something is different as I watch, but I can't put my finger on what it is—why this dance feels so revolutionary—outside, of course, how beautiful it is.



ALAN WINSLOW

After the preview, Black Iris Project's founder and choreographer Jeremy McQueen, *Madiba* dancers Daphne M. Lee and Lawrence Rines, and the ballet's composer, Carman Moore, take the stage to answer questions from the audience. Lee points out that, as a black dancer, "often, we're the only one, or one of the only ones, in our company. They don't cast us to dance together. You don't see a black couple dancing together in a predominantly white company."

I think about that, about the anomaly of tenderness, about the revolutionary nature of choreographing new ways to love.

Toward the end of the talk, an older woman stands up in the audience. "I'd like to ask the young sister," she says, meaning Lee, "Why don't you wear your hair natural? Let it be free. Dance with an afro in the ballet. You're a role model for our young."

Lee sits up straight in her chair. She chooses her words carefully. "This is about the history of the dance," she says. The dancer's bun, she explains, is a tradition of classical ballet; historically, it's a way to symbolize to the audience that the dancers were professionals, artists. "I want to show our hair can do this as well," she says. "I want to show that we can be a part of this." This statement makes me want to Google "black hair in dancer's bun" and search for this possibility. But I also realize it's the paradox of tradition: You are drawn in by the rituals, by the sense of belonging, but you are reminded of the ways you don't quite belong.

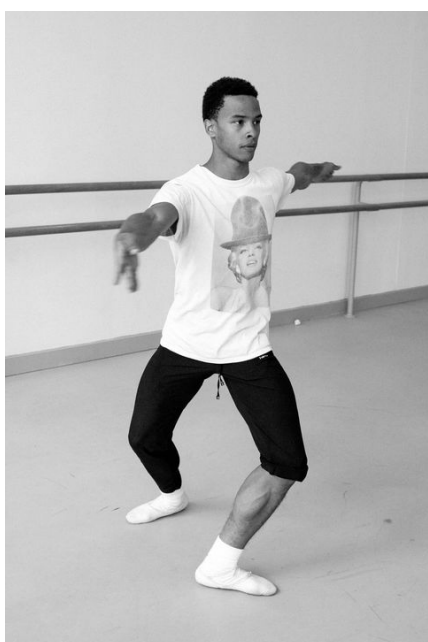
For Black Iris Project founder Jeremy McQueen, this paradox simply doesn't exist. He's willed this alternate vision of black bodies and beauty into existence, certain of the artistic vision he wishes to see. He founded the collaborative this year as a way to showcase black ballet professionals (he uses the term collaborative rather than company as the dancers in Black Iris all dance in other professional companies throughout the U.S.) and create classical ballets rooted in black history and the black experience. The three ballets of the inaugural season—Madiba, Black Iris, and Brown Baby—were conceived by an artistic team made up entirely of artists of color. In addition to the majority of the dancers in the collaborative, the choreographers, costume designers, composers, and lighting designer are all people of color.



MATTHEW MURPHY

McQueen is a gifted choreographer—in 2013, he won the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago's Choreographers of Color Award. He's presented choreographic works at Jacob's Pillow, has performed in the national tours of *Wicked* and *The Color Purple*, and has taught ballet for both American Ballet Theatre (ABT) and Alvin Ailey's outreach programs. It was through teaching that the need for Black Iris Project became clear. "A great number of my students were minorities," McQueen says about the making of *Madiba*. "For minorities there's this real sense in a that once you see someone on stage that looks like you, it really provides an extra boost of inspiration and encouragement. I felt like many of my students weren't particularly interested in ballet because of the lack of visibility." Because representation matters. And so does access.

McQueen was introduced to dance by his parents, who took him to performances at a very young age. "My parents went to a historically black college, and they were first introduced to the arts there," he says when we meet a few days later in the lobby of the Marriott in Times Square, which is around the corner from the New 42nd Street Studios where the collective is rehearsing for a two night engagement with New York Live Arts. "They grew up in very large families and were very poor, so their families couldn't afford to take them to go see Broadway shows. They made an effort to go out and explore the things they heard about themselves." His parents' lives and spirits are infused in the ballets he's created.



In 2013, McQueen was commissioned to create a ballet for the Joffrey Academy of Dance in Chicago. That ballet became *Black Iris*. The mood of the piece was inspired by a Georgia O'Keeffe painting McQueen saw at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He encountered the painting shortly after his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. "Visually, nothing had really struck me before," he says. "It reminded me of my mother...she has had to overcome so many different challenges—from her own battle with cancer as well as supporting my father's battle through cancer. And even segregation. She lived through that in the South, and the assassination of Dr. King. And she has continued to press forward and continued to inspire others. And so I wanted to create a ballet that encompassed what I feel personifies my mother and many other women, specifically black women, and the strides that they have taken."

In addition to *Black Iris*, the two other ballets McQueen created for his troupe's inaugural season are *Madiba*, and *Brown Baby*, about the daughter of a black American WWII soldier and the German dancer he meets after the war. (The latter was co-choreographed with Lauren Cox, whose grandmother served as inspiration for the story.)

"I FELT LIKE MANY OF MY STUDENTS WEREN'T PARTICULARLY INTERESTED IN BALLET BECAUSE OF THE LACK OF VISIBILITY."

McQueen's co-collaborators are keenly aware of the uniqueness of these particular productions. Says dancer Christina Spigner, "Everything is so deliberate. There are so many conscious choices. Everything is so meaningful. Like, this was choreographed for this specific work, and this specific character to tell this specific story, and that doesn't really happen a lot."

Black Iris Project is only a few months old. Its future depends on cultivating an audience of ballet and dance fans. And this comes back to access. McQueen dreams of touring historically black colleges. "What kind of impact could we have if we take it directly there?" he says. "In order for the arts to survive, we need supporters, and in order for us to see the change and the diversity in the types of ballets that are being created, and the types of operas that are being presented, we have to show and express that there's an interest for that."

At the end of the Schomburg presentation, McQueen reiterated how much of the Black Iris Project is a labor of love. They've received some matching grants to help fund their production, but they still need to crowdsource \$50,000 to make their projected budget. "Please tell your friends and family," he said, and then the talk was over.



MATTHEW MURPHY

As I waited for my turn to congratulate McQueen, it became clear to me that, more than anything, the audience was vying for connection. An older woman gently pushed her way to the front of the line, pulled a folded up bill from her pocket and slipped it into McQueen's hand before turning to walk away. She didn't speak to him during the whole exchange. And then the line surged forward. People reached out to touch McQueen, touch the dancers, take pictures with them. One woman stood at the edge of the stage and asked McQueen for suggestions of where she could send her granddaughter for dance class. He patiently answered, but the woman was insistent. "What if she doesn't like that one? Can you help?"

As I stood in line, waiting for my turn to congratulate Jeremy, I listened to the people around me. Some used their own stories about their love of dance, others simply wanted to tell him about their most talented relative. Some quoted scholars and activists and historians.

And I was there with them, not exactly sure how to express my reaction to what we had just seen. Worried that if we didn't find the words, we may never get to see it again. Worried that words could never do the feeling justice.

The New York Times

5 Dance Performances to See in N.Y.C. This Weekend



Courtney Celeste Spears will portray a grieving mother in “A Mother’s Rite,” one of two works by Jeremy McQueen appearing at SummerStage at Marcus Garvey Park on Aug. 16. Matthew Murphy

By Gia Kourlas

Aug. 9, 2018

Our guide to dance performances happening this weekend and in the week ahead.

JEREMY MCQUEEN’S BLACK IRIS PROJECT at Marcus Garvey Park (Aug. 16, 8 p.m.)

For SummerStage, Mr. McQueen celebrates the centennial of Nelson Mandela’s birth with “Madiba,” which is based on the South African leader’s life, and stages a reimagining of Stravinsky’s “The Rite of Spring”: “A Mother’s Rite.” In this new work, Mr. McQueen focuses on a woman griefs after her son is murdered by the police. The transfixing Courtney Celeste Spears, who portrays the mother, is a recent addition to the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

212-360-1399, cityparksfoundation.org/summerstage

OUT

This Queer Black Choreographer Has Turned Nelson Mandela's Life Into a Ballet



Photo by Matthew Murphy

Jeremy McQueen's *Madiba* is part of the Kennedy Center's Ballet Across America, a weeklong series illustrating the nation's most creative and exciting dance, curated this year by Misty Copeland and Justin Peck.

BY LES FABIAN BRATHWAITE MARCH 16 2017 3:15 PM EDT

Jeremy McQueen was introduced to ballet in the 7th grade while attending a performing arts middle/high school in San Diego. Bullied and teased for his weight, high-pitched voice, and the way he dressed, he was given the choice of taking P.E. or dance to fulfill his physical education credit. Not having much in the way of athleticism, and tired of changing for P.E. in the bathroom stall, McQueen eventually went with dance. He hated it at first, and hated wearing tights and a dance belt, but his dance teacher, who was also black and male, encouraged him to stick with it.

McQueen credits being exposed to other black men in dance—such as Desmond Richardson and Eric Underwood—for inspiring him, though there were very few men of color, particularly openly queer men of color, when he first got into ballet. That, however, is slowly changing.

McQueen is the founder of the Black Iris Project, a ballet collaborative that's putting on a ballet about the life of former South African president and noted Naomi Campbell mentor Nelson Mandela. *Madiba*, the 25-minute ballet based on an original score by Carman Moore, follows the life of Mandela from birth to death. It's being presented as part of the Kennedy Center's Ballet Across America, curated by dance-choreographer Justin Peck and national treasure Misty Copeland.

Here, McQueen discusses his inspiration for *Madiba*, queer men in ballet, and how the art form is becoming more diverse.



Jeremy McQueen

OUT: Tell me about the Black Iris Project.

Jeremy McQueen: The Black Iris Project is a ballet collaborative that brings together professional black ballet dancers from companies around the country, and black artists of various other mediums to create new ballets that are rooted in black history or the black experience.

While growing up, the first ballet I was introduced to was *The Nutcracker*, based on a European fairy tale. I loved ballet because it was linear and not so abstract, but I saw very few classical story ballets that reflected my heritage and upbringing. So the mission of The Black Iris Project is to essentially be the change we wish to see in the world.

Often you'll see modern dance works such as *Revelations* that are rooted in black heritage and cultural tradition, but it's extremely rare that you see a black ballet. Our ballets are not only rooted in black stories and history, but they are also created by a team of black creatives. *Madiba* for instance is the story of Nelson Mandela's life. The choreography, lighting design, costume design and music were all created by black men.

My idea to create The Black Iris Project came after I had created my first classical ballet entitled *Black Iris* which was inspired by and in tribute to three strong black women who helped raise me. I created the work in 2013 as part of an award I received from The Jolrey Ballet. My mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer back in 2012 and I was working through that along with struggling to find work as a performer, and also trying to get better as a choreographer. So I took how I was feeling and created a ballet which later became a larger project.

Essentially the project came out of lack of opportunity and an opportunity to help fill a gap that felt was missing in the ballet world. The Black Iris Project also aims to bring more minorities to appreciate ballet and the arts as well as push boundaries on the types of stories that are told through classical ballet.

How did *Madiba* come together?

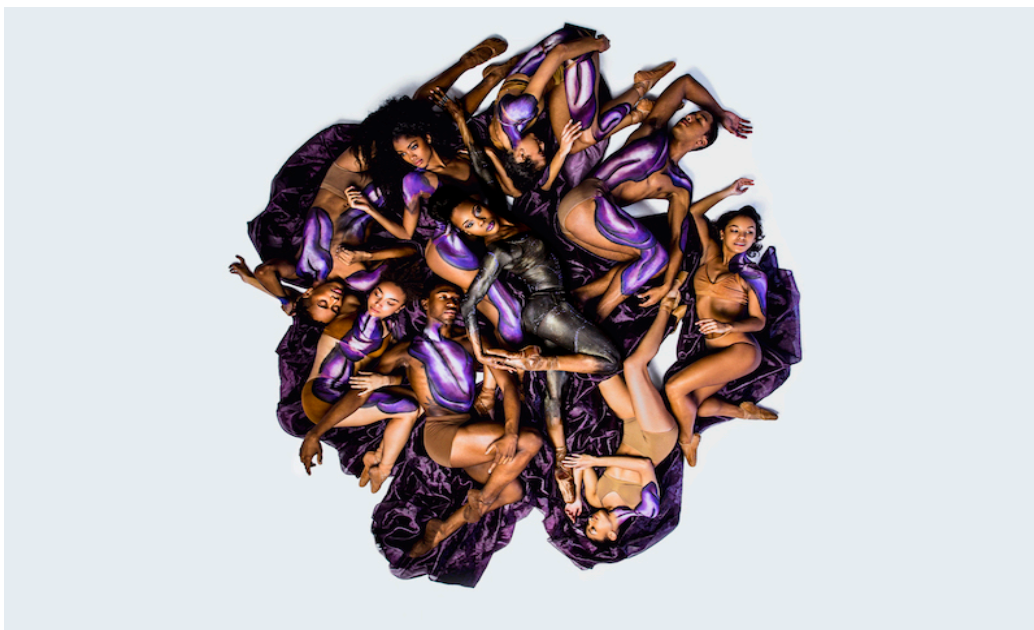
I started doing a lot of research on various black composers, musicians, visual artists, writers, costume designers, as well as the stories I could tell through movement. I wanted to know who was out there and see who's work and lives sparked my interest. One day I stumbled upon an article about a new piece of classical music that had been composed about Nelson Mandela's life entitled *Madiba* that had just premiered at Carnegie Hall—it sent shockwaves through my body. I prayed that the composer was black and that I would like the music. I looked up the composer, Carman Moore, who was indeed black, and I immediately wrote him and asked if I could meet with him to hear the music.

He graciously welcomed me into his home to have a listen, and as I started to hear the piece, that shockwave feeling came back again. I told him about my idea of what I wanted to do and before I knew it he was on board. So I then started researching and learning more about Nelson Mandela—when I started I really didn't know very much about him—and two years later, we'll be presenting this ballet at the Kennedy Center. What?! I'm so humbled and grateful for this dream come true.

Are there more people of color entering the world of ballet? Has the ballet world been traditionally accepting of more diverse dancers and choreographers? If not, why?

Social media has been a wonderful tool for visibility as well as for connecting dancers of color during various stages of their training for inspiration and conversation. This is very different from when I was in school. I had to go to the public library to check out video cassette tapes of dancers and performances. We didn't have YouTube or Instagram or any of that. So the resources make the accessibility and inspiration that much greater. Not to mention figures like Misty Copeland, Eric Underwood, Michaela DePrince—they're often in the news so it helps other kids say, 'Hey, they look like me so maybe I can do that too.' And that's always wonderful to see.

Yes, the ballet world in general has often seemed hesitant to accept more black dancers professionally, and especially choreographers. As to the reason why? I think it all boils down to ideas on class and race. Ballet is often seen as being such an elitist art form. It started out as being something only kings and royalty did. So it's often been seen as a segregated art form that has been culturally passed down. But when you're growing up as a black dancer in that type of environment it can be very challenging mentally. So in a sense, the bullying I experienced from P.E. to dance doesn't just go away when you step inside the dance studio. A lot of times the "bullying" also comes from inside it. But I believe that it's the freeing qualities of artistic expression, and the love of the art form, that keeps dancers that face challenges such as mine from giving up on their dreams.



The Black Iris Project

This might sound like a naïve question, but are there a lot of queer men in ballet? Is it harder to make it in ballet, do you think, if you are queer?

Even though ballet is so strict and requires a massive amount of discipline, it still has its creatively freeing properties which I believe attracts queer men. The arts in general are known for being so liberating and expressive and I know that there are many men like myself who have found ballet and dance to be a safe haven. Do I know if there are more gay or straight men in ballet? I definitely won't attempt to answer that. I've encountered a number of both in the ballet world so it's hard to share what a percentage might look like. But I will say dance in general is just more of a safer space for gay men to feel comfortable to express themselves and be vulnerable.

Masculinity is often the subject of scrutiny not only in ballet but in many aspects of the performing arts. But as actors, which is essentially what a dancer is, we learn to play lots of different roles and wear lots of different hats. I casually have some eliminate tendencies and believe that that at various parts in my career, people have looked at me and said, 'But is it believable that he could play that character?' So that has been a challenge. But really good actors can play just about anything. And I've had some opportunities in my career to really step outside of my comfort zone and play roles that others might be surprised that I have played. Also, women outnumber men greatly in ballet, so it's generally easier for a male (regardless of their sexual orientation) to have a ballet career just because strong men generally are in high demand to partner with women.

What do you think is something unique that queer men of color have to offer ballet?

Our diversity and our stories. I was chatting with some of my students recently about the role that art serves in society when I found this quote: "Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it." We live in a country that is comprised of so many varieties of people in terms of shapes, sizes, color, ethnic backgrounds, spiritual beliefs, etc., and I believe that it is the duty of art to reflect not only the past and present, but also help shape the future and bring about equality.

Ballet Across America will run from April 17 through April 23 at the Kennedy Center Opera House—for tickets, click here (<http://www.kennedy-center.org/calendar/event/BRBSF>).



CULTURE (/CULTURE)

Mental Health and The Black Lives Matter Movement Take Center Stage In Powerful New Ballet

“We really do need a support system of people to help us build back up to where we need to be and where we want to be.”

LINDSAY GELLER @LGELLS

JUL 13, 2018

Choreographer Jeremy McQueen was rehearsing his new ballet *A Mother's Rite* with dancer Courtney Celeste Spears when Stephon Clark was shot and killed by police in his backyard. News of the tragedy held extra weight for McQueen because his ballet centered on a mother's grieving process after losing her son to police brutality. "We needed art in that moment. We needed dance and movement in that moment to express ourselves because we were just so sad and frustrated," he told A Plus.

Now, the founder of the Black Iris Project, an "unapologetically Black" ballet collective, is bringing that art to others who may need it. In New York City's free SummerStage performance on August 16 at Marcus Garvey Park, Spears will embody the Black Lives Matter movement in a powerful 37- minute solo.



Photo Courtesy of the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts

Inspiration for the ballet struck McQueen at a Solange concert in 2017. Though he had begun working on the ballet a year earlier, that all changed when the R&B star performed her song "Mad."

"I had an entirely different kind of vision of what I wanted to do. I knew that it involved Black lives and a shooting of some sort, but this ballet really transformed when I went to go see Solange," he explained. "... She was talking about 'I have the right to be mad,' she started to get really upset and just engulfed in her experience ... and that's when it just kind of hit me. I started thinking about what do we have the right to be mad about as Black people? As a culture? As the individual that she is?" The urgency in her performance spurred McQueen to contemplate the different stories that were meaningful and impactful to him as reasons he, too, had to be mad.

That, as well as his own father's passing in 2016, compelled McQueen to tell this story through dance. "I started thinking about grief and understanding my mother's process through grief and my process, and before I knew it, I got on the train, and I felt like I had this entire ballet laid out in front of me," he said. "I wanted to share and showcase a mother's grief, a mother's anger — her resentment, her frustration, her sadness, her depression."

While an artist-in-residence at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, which co-commissioned his ballet, McQueen and Spears worked for about three months straight developing the ballet section by section. He also collaborated with playwright Angelica Chéri to create a fictional story inspired by real events. "We found specific moments in the storyline that we wanted to connect with musically so ... we honestly kind of put this together like it was a play," he explained. "... We really wanted to create a sense of authenticity with the story, and we felt like the only way that we could really do that was if we fully developed this idea."



Photo Courtesy of the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts

To that end, McQueen researched the stages of grief so he could bring each one to life on stage. He also read *Rest in Power*, the autobiography of Sabrina Fulton, Trayvon Martin's mother, to educate himself on the uniquely devastating experience of losing a child to gun violence. "It was a very transformative experience," he explained. "And it's also been very transformative for me learning so much about all the different mothers throughout history that have lost their children to not only police brutality, but also racially based violence and how that is so transformative for the mother and for their families."

McQueen believes it's necessary to use a traditionally delicate artform like ballet to tell these tough stories because they are more culturally relevant than the fairy tales audiences are accustomed to seeing. "I think we are in this place where especially ballet companies are very much at the forefront of the conversation of wanting to diversify who is in their companies and who we see onstage, but we have yet to really diversify the stories that are being told," he said. "And I think that the spotlight really helps push that conversation even further. It's not just about putting Misty Copeland in a swan costume. We need to also see stories that identify with her community."

That's why McQueen chose to choreograph to Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, a score that has been controversial since its 1913 debut during the Paris season of Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes company. "People were booing; people were so upset because Vaslav Nijinsky [the original ballet choreographer] had really gone out on a limb and pushed the boundaries on how the ballerinas did ballet ... a lot of the moves were choreographed where the dancers were pigeon-toed," he explained.

"It's part of what really changed the landscape of classical ballet and how we look at it. Since then, so many different versions of *Rite of Spring* have been done that have also been extremely revolutionary ... everyone has kind of used this score as a way of pushing culture forward, and pushing dance and movement forward."

With *A Mother's Rite*, McQueen aims to add to that forward movement by provoking conversation about how to come together as a community, specifically within the Black Lives Matter movement, but also spark a larger discussion about mental health in the Black community.

"With the injustices that happen to young Black men and women, we often come together, but we focus so much on informative change — in terms of policy change and fighting against the judgments that have been made — but I think that we also need to look within our community and find ways that we can strengthen one another," he said. "A lot of times these mothers and these families, they go ... kind of unrecognized in a sense of what they're going through. I feel like there's been so much happening in our society ... that oftentimes we get caught up in the next political headline, or the next headline of the most recent killing, that sometimes people get forgotten or left out."



Photos Courtesy of the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts

McQueen hopes that, by showing an individual go through the grieving process on her own, the ballet will encourage audience members to not only ask themselves how they can build a stronger community, but how to ask others in their community for help. "I think that this ballet kind of provokes that idea of ...we can't just do it on our own," he said. "We really do need a support system of people to help us build back up to where we need to be and where we want to be."

He noted how, particularly in the Black community, going to therapy is often considered "as a sign of failure or a sign of weakness." Growing up, he was taught that going to church was all the therapy his family, and the larger Black community, needed. "But as I got older, and I lived in New York City, I realized how important it is for me to have a therapist and ... holistic medicine and health," he said. "It's so much a part of who I am, in addition to my own religious beliefs, as well. I think it supports even more who I am, and now years later, I finally got [my mom] to start going to therapy."

But it isn't just cultural attitudes that can hold people back from seeking out help, many people simply don't have the financial resources to afford mental health counseling, as McQueen knows all too well. "When we really look at it, there's also a financial demographic that doesn't really make therapy accessible to communities of color," he said. "And so that's one of the biggest things for me is wanting to find a way to be that therapy."

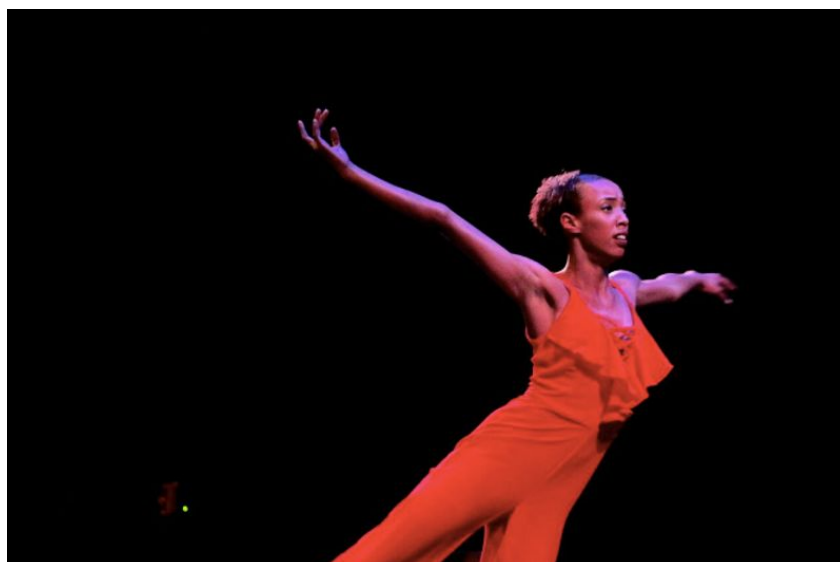




Photo Credit: Argenis Apolinario

At one point in his ballet, the mother contemplates committing suicide because she doesn't know how to go on living without her son. "I think, sometimes, we as people may not often see or understand the pain that someone's going through until it's too late," McQueen said. "And so ... I wanted [the ballet] to kind of just shine light on mental health. I think we often hear about people after they're gone, but I think there's still so much more that we can do right now to uplift and to support and to encourage people that are going through depression, anxiety, and all of those different things."

The best way McQueen knows how to do that is through ballet. "Dance is my outlet. Dance is how I can feel better because it just — how it allows me to creatively express myself," he said. "That's the beauty of the arts, and I think that's why the arts are so important, and why we really need to continue to grow arts education because it really does have transformative powers." One of the biggest parts of the Black Iris Project is its #artheals message.

McQueen is committed to using his chosen art form to encourage others to "find something that allows you to express yourselves so that you don't hold on to the anger and resentment and frustration and things that keep you from moving forward in your life."



Photo Credit: Argenis Apolinario

The New York Times

ArtsBeat

New York Times Blog

DANCE

Jeremy McQueen's Ballet Collective to Foster Black Works

By Joshua Barone February 25, 2016 1:02 pm



The **Black Iris Project**, a new ballet collective aiming to foster and present new works about black lives and history, takes its name from a Georgia O'Keeffe painting, "Black Iris III" (1926).

Jeremy McQueen, the choreographer and founder of the recently announced Black Iris Project, saw the painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2012, and he said he became obsessed with its black-and-white dichotomy, which to him looked like a floral yin and yang. While creating a new work in 2013 for the Joffrey Ballet, which had awarded him its Choreographers of Color prize, he was inspired: He saw the Washington Ballet dancer Nardia Boodoo, who in his mind embodied the O'Keeffe painting and the history of black womanhood. The result was "Black Iris," his piece for Ms. Boodoo.

The Black Iris Project was born when Mr. McQueen decided he didn't want to end his exploration of black history through dance. "I really wanted to bring emerging talent together to create new stories of ballet," he said. Citing Misty Copeland's turn as Odette/Odile in American Ballet Theater's "Swan Lake" last year as an example, he said there has been a "huge shift" in diversity onstage.

With grants from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, New Music USA and the CUNY Dance Initiative, the Black Iris Project has brought together 20 dancers of color from a variety of companies, including Stephanie Rae Williams from Dance Theater of Harlem and Daniel Harder of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Mr. McQueen also tapped into his musical theater history to recruit, for example, Taeler Cyrus, a company dancer in "An American in Paris" on Broadway.

But, he added, casting black dancers in repertory works isn't enough. "The work that we present needs to be very reflective of our current society," he said.

Three ballets, including a restaging of "Black Iris," are in store for the company's inaugural season, which begins with a 10-day residency at the Rockefeller Brothers Fund's Pocantico Center in Tarrytown, N.Y., in May, followed by an engagement at New York Live Arts in July. Mr. McQueen said additional performances are to be announced soon.

The Black Iris Project

Choreographer Jeremy McQueen champions justice through dance. By **Wendy Taucher** - August 29, 2018



Choreographer Jeremy McQueen, left, teaches Karine Plantadit the steps to one of the Black Iris Project dances. —Gabrielle Mannino

Choreographer Jeremy McQueen's Black Iris Project returns to Vineyard Arts Project through Sept. 2, wrapping up the Edgartown artist colony's summer. The New York City collaborative will present new choreography at Vineyard Arts on Saturday, Sept. 1, from 7 to 8 pm. Since opening their season last June, McQueen's work, "A Mother's Rite," made its premier at Marcus Garvey Park's SummerStage. The solo was paired with another of McQueen's politically inspired works, "Madiba," an en pointe ballet honoring Nelson Mandela's centenary.

McQueen created the unapologetically black-centric Black Iris Project in 2016 in order to champion social equity, justice, and education. Using the ballet vocabulary, with its rich history of narrative dance, thrilling technique, and synergistic musical choices, McQueen places himself in the center of the movement to expand the presence of artists of color in the genre. Misty Copeland, the American Ballet Theatre principal dancer, in her role as curator, invited the Black Iris 14-dancer ensemble to perform "Madiba" with full orchestra at the 2017 Kennedy Center's Ballet Across America festival.

McQueen has comprehensive dance and choreography training and studied music from age 5. He finds inspiration in music, and is attracted to narrative choreography. McQueen says, "I'm interested in my work being accessible. I want to connect with the audience and community in a culturally relevant way. I choose stories that have significant historical realities, align with my political beliefs and the emotions they evoke." It is important to remember a socially relevant top whatever its merits, does not make a good dance. Good choreography makes a good dance. McQueen weaves passionate tales with complex structures, surrounded by unique sounds. He makes good choreography while fulfilling the Black Iris mission.

Dance, notwithstanding ballet's long history of "story ballet," is not an easy form in which to tell a tale. It is excellent at creating emotion, implying narrative, or making abstractions. The famous 19th-century ballets like "Swan Lake," "The Nutcracker," and "Giselle," use simple plot lines, standardized structure, and mime with fantastic music to frame the best of what traditional ballet contains: lovers, other-worldly beings, astonishing airborne feats, balancing acts, speedy turns, fast footwork, and gorgeous line.

Contemporary modern dance choreographers do capitalize on some of ballet's best choreographic elements. Martha's Vineyard audiences may be familiar with the work of frequent Yard artists David Dorfman and Patricia Hoffbauer/George Emilio Sanchez. They use movement, text, projections, and eclectic music and sound, successfully illustrating a nonabstract specific message, often through dreamlike chronologies. Arguably the world's most famous ballet choreographer, George Balanchine, created narrative work, but he tended to work more in the purely abstract, as in "Symphony in C" or "Agon," or implied narratives like "Square Dance" or "Union Jack." Agnes de Mille, one of the 20th century's most ingenious ballet storytellers, did so without using spoken word, as in "Rodeo" and "Fall River Legend." Without being derivative, McQueen, so far, is inventing successfully in all of these worlds, balancing much of the best of what these four choreographers bring to the table.

Following a residency at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, McQueen used his first Vineyard Arts residency this past June to make multiple edits to his completed draft of "Rite," radically changing a significant element of the work. Initially designed to use projections, McQueen, who wants this work to tour to all types of theaters, schools, and festivals, made the practical decision to cut the technically complex and expensive projections. After wracking his brain, he eventually substituted a recorded voice over the already chosen music, Igor Stravinsky's four-hand arrangement of "Rite of Spring," to great effect. Having an entire week to step back and view live runs of "Rite," to think, dream, and revise, was an artistic luxury. McQueen used this gift of time and space from Vineyard Arts well. He finds gesture, facial expression, and energy as intriguing as the actual movements and spacing, and refined accordingly. McQueen searches his gut for what is working and what is not, the mark of a mature artistic ego.

During his upcoming residency, McQueen will be working on his new dance, based on the life of Harriet Tubman. As he did with "Rite," he will make both a film and a live performance. McQueen will set a draft of the work at Alabama State University in Montgomery, using student dancers and a professional en pointe, playing Tubman. McQueen will be also be exploring the woods, as they play such an important setting in Tubman's Underground Railroad journeys. He says, "I have music in mind as well, but it's early days, and I know the process will evolve as I analyze research and studio sessions."

McQueen's projects have been funded by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and Harlem School of the Arts, among others. He won the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago's Choreographers of Color Award and was two-time finalist of the Capezio Award for Choreographic Excellence. McQueen has a sensible approach to the amount of work Black Iris creates, aiming to choreograph one new dance per year. This is a time frame many other choreographers, who often find themselves in a position of working too fast and too often, ought to be helped to follow. It encourages true creativity, thoughtful, rigorous experimentation, necessary revising, and hopefully, good choreography.

When discussing his commitment to the Black Iris mission, McQueen relates what he considers a central event in his artistic continuum. "I was at a Solange concert at Radio City Music Hall. The audience was entirely enraptured. Solange was in the zone. One of her songs had the lyric 'You got the right to be mad.' Those words encapsulated the energy in my heart, my soul, and my need to participate in change." Collective grief, collective innovation, collective agitation, collective power. It's what McQueen's work is all about. In movement.



Black Iris Project makes its Texas debut with the world premiere of *The Storm*.
Shown: Larissa Gerszke and Gabriel Hyman Photo by Whitney Browne

Ballet Inspired by Harvey and Katrina Premiering at Miller Outdoor Theatre

SUSIE TOMMANEY | AUGUST 12, 2019

The path Jeremy McQueen has chosen is a joyful one, creating original ballets that address and celebrate diversity, while also making them accessible to wider audiences through the New York-based **Black Iris Project**, a ballet collaborative that he founded in 2016.

Last summer he was in Martha's Vineyard, taking part in an artistic residency and thinking about his next ballet, when his thoughts returned to an unfinished challenge. Years ago McQueen's mentor suggested that he create a ballet for Rachmaninoff's *Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29, but at the time he just didn't have a storyline that connected.

The composition was inspired by Swiss Symbolist Arnold Böcklin's painting, which itself has been interpreted as depicting the souls of Greek mythology being carried to the underworld. "The music is orchestral, dark, very challenging to count musically," says McQueen.

But sitting on that beach in Martha's Vineyard, the connections started to form. Having grown up in southern California, he had always been captivated by water, and his thoughts turned to the people he's met over the years: There were the teachers who rallied after Hurricane Katrina, and who proved themselves to be resilient both in the rebuilding process and against the unjustness of uneven aid. He was there in New York during Hurricane Sandy. And he thought about his trip to Puerto Rico a few years ago, with its natural beauty, and how he felt when he learned about the devastation after Hurricane Maria.

In doing research for his new ballet, *The Storm*, more than a few folks looked at McQueen with incredulity when he asked them, "What did you gain from the storm?" It was easier to answer his other question, "What did you lose?" He ended up creating a public art mural with those answers and his theme gained focus.

"When the storms of life are raging, how do you weather the storm? That's what gave me the overall artistic theme. How do we prevail when things start to weigh us down," says McQueen, who says he turns to his faith, his spirituality, to gospel music and even to contemporary film and music.

"There's this quote from Dory from *Finding Nemo*: 'Just Keep Swimming,'" says McQueen. "I remember that from years and years ago. I'm still swimming. Despite the challenges, the rising tides, the rip currents, you just have to keep swimming."

The Storm, which weaves a narrative from those hurricanes, makes its world premiere this weekend in Houston. But it's much more than meteorology and mythology: The choreographer has made another very interesting connection to the Middle Passage and how the Atlantic slave traders' ships followed the same trajectory as tropical storms.

He was inspired in part by Chicago rapper Lupe Fiasco's seventh album, *Drogas Wave*, which explores the idea that Africans thrown overboard during their transatlantic passage found new life at the bottom of the ocean. It's a revisionist history full of hope and promise, that those living underwater took on the mission of sinking future ships.

McQueen's Black Iris Project will be working with six Houston-based artists for this premiere. "The six local artists are the water; they are the ancestors from the Middle Passage and also the essence of the water — life giving and also life taking.

"They're not dead, they're alive underwater and they're happy. It's an interesting narrative. It was not tragic; we created our own world where we're happy, similar to Wakanda," says McQueen, who points to the quote from Black Panther.

"Bury me in the ocean with my ancestors who jumped from the ships, because they knew death was better than bondage." — Killmonger, from Black Panther

"My spirituality, I feel that I've always been guided and protected by my ancestors. All of the things I've gone through in my life, they haven't all been pleasant, but I feel that I've always been surrounded by love and support," says McQueen. "No matter what we go through there are people supporting us that we can't even see. "Even when we go through really dark moments in our lives, there are people supporting us."

Also on the program is Black Iris Project's signature work, *Black Iris*, inspired by Georgia O'Keeffe's painting, and *A Mother's Rite*, set to Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*.

"*A Mother's Rite* is another very challenging score to say the least but it follows the trajectory of one mother's journey of various stages of grief after police brutality," says McQueen, who labels it "basically a 40 minute solo" that follows what it must feel like to be thrust in the spotlight after a horrific incident.

"Miller makes these performances free and that's completely in alignment of who we are and our mission, to make these programs free or affordable for [people of color] to see their lives told through ballet, which is generally never done."

Jeremy McQueen's Black Iris Project is scheduled for August 16 at 8:30 p.m. Friday at Miller Outdoor Theatre, 6000 Hermann Park Drive. For information, visit milleroutdoortheatre.com. Free.

To learn more about the Black Iris Project, visit blackirisproject.org.

Then come back Tuesday night and catch that Killmonger quote for yourself.

Movies at Miller: Black Panther is scheduled for August 20 at 8 p.m. Tuesday at Miller Outdoor Theatre, 6000 Hermann Park Drive. For information, visit milleroutdoortheatre.com. Free.

HOUSTON★CHRONICLE

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT // ARTS & THEATER

Inspired by Harvey and Katrina, Jeremy McQueen's Black Iris Project dives deep with "The Storm"

By Molly Glentzer, Staff writer

Aug. 9, 2019 Updated: Aug. 10, 2019 1:14 p.m.



Paige White, center, and fellow ballet dancers rehearse on Wednesday, July 31, 2019, in Houston. The Black Iris Project's performance is inspired by hurricanes Harvey and Katrina, as well as the Middle Passage. The show debuts Aug. 16 at the Miller Outdoor Theater. Photo: Godofredo A Vásquez, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Two years after Hurricanes Harvey and Maria, seven years after Sandy, 14 years after Katrina and up to four centuries after the Middle Passage era that brought Africans to America on slave ships, choreographer Jeremy McQueen sees themes repeating.

One, aside from the obvious watery hell, is resilience in communities of color. That idea drives his new ballet "The Storm." Commissioned by the Ford Foundation and the Radio City Rockettes, the 25-minute

dance premieres Friday at Miller Outdoor Theatre, during the first Texas performance for McQueen's Black Iris Project.

With the 3-year-old collaborative company, whose performers are mostly dancers of color, McQueen aims to fill a void. He's creating an original touring work each year — not "Swan Lake" or "The Sleeping Beauty" with black dancers but all-new narratives, across a variety of idioms, based on black history or the black experience.

Based in New York, the Black Iris Project enlists professional dancers from across the country each summer, when many of them have time off from jobs with other companies. "Dancers are always looking for work in the summer," McQueen says. "It's a huge opportunity for us to bring them together."

Jeremy McQueen's Black Iris Project

When: 8:30 p.m. Friday

Where: Miller Outdoor Theatre, 6000 Hermann Park Drive

Details: Free; 281-373-3386, milleroutdoortheatre.com

A San Diego native who graduated 11 years ago from The Ailey School/Fordham University, McQueen began his career as a dancer with the national touring companies of "Wicked" and "The Color Purple" as well as the New York and touring companies of "Radio City Christmas Spectacular."

Winning one of three Choreographers of Color awards in 2013 from the Joffrey Ballet, he created the dance that would eventually become his company's signature, "Black Iris." Also on the Miller program, that piece borrows its title from Georgia O'Keeffe's painting "Black Iris III," which McQueen saw at a museum during an emotionally difficult time: His mother had gotten a cancer diagnosis, and he was 3,000 miles away. "It's a ballet for the three strong black women (including an aunt and his godmother) who taught me to be courageous and strong," he said.

Maternal instincts also inform "A Mother's Rite," a solo set to Igor Stravinsky's turbulent "Rite of Spring" that explores a mother's stages of grief after police murder her son. "It's a fictional story based on the lives of real mothers," McQueen says. "Therapy is often not affordable, and it's also taboo in communities of color."

The Miller program also includes a brief duet about a young, black, gay male coming of age. Along with a few of his regulars, McQueen hired six Houston dancers for "The Storm." Mondo Morales designed the costumes and a quiltlike fabric set that evokes water and waves — "both life-giving and life-taking," McQueen says. He dove into the history of the Middle Passage last year after hearing Lupe Fiasco's conceptual rap song "[WAV Files.](#)" which conjures an underwater afterlife for Africans who committed suicide by leaping overboard from slave ships.

But the score for the new ballet is not rap. It's classical composer Sergei Rachmaninoff's lushly orchestrated "Isle of the Dead," which was inspired by a wildly popular 19th-century painting of a lone figure on a boat, approaching a forboding island. McQueen also draws ideas from community-outreach sessions. In Houston and New Orleans, he asked participants, "How do you weather the storm when the storms of life are raging?"

But truthfully, he already has an answer of his own — a favorite line from the animated film "Finding Nemo" that he considers a kind of spirit guide: "Just keep swimming," he says. "I always feel like I'm going against the current."