



At Work With: Kyle Abraham

In a New York studio, the choreographer dances, rehearses and breaks down the meaning of his “postmodern gumbo” technique with *Djassi DaCosta Johnson*. Photography by *Zoltan Tombor*





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In a rehearsal studio at New York Live Arts, Kyle Abraham is leading his dancers like a conductor. He moves his fingers in sync with their legs as they dance through the space in athletic, sinuous formations. At one point he begins dancing himself; gliding into the middle of the room, his body alternating between animated pop-like sequences and languid balletic undulations. “Yes!” he says. The room buzzes as the dancers finish the piece, clapping for each other and collapsing to the floor. Abraham pauses, then asks with a smile, “Are you okay?”

Abraham, born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, knows the two sides of this relationship equally well. In his 20s, he worked as a dancer for various companies before striking out in 2006 and founding his own: Abraham In Motion. In the 13 years since, he has built a fan base—and been the recipient of awards including a MacArthur Fellowship—for his choreography, which incorporates a powerful understanding of American vernacular movement. He has used his platform to comment on the human condition and the black experience in America, while also challenging sexual stereotypes.

We sat down before his rehearsal to talk about his most recent, celebrated, work for New York City Ballet—“A paragon of outsider infiltration,” in the words

of one *Financial Times* critic—and what it will take to break the patriarchy within the dance world.

You’re a choreographer, but also a dancer in your own right. Do you have a daily dance practice? I call what I do a “postmodern gumbo” because I’m taking things from all different modern dance techniques and genres, and kind of using them as a movement vocabulary. My warmup varies and depends on if I’m dancing. If I’m going to be dancing or doing some of my own work that day, I’ll probably do my own warmup that I’ve made up. If it’s a rehearsal, I like to start with my goals for the day, just writing them down for a little bit of clarity, and then I’ll dive into the physical practice.

What inspires your choreography? I play with gesture in different ways, and with found movement—movement that’s in everyday cultures. Hopefully, when people who are from those backgrounds come to the ballet and see the movement, [they’ll] be like, “Oh, you know, I saw myself for the first time in the ballet.”

Choreographers who have come before you, such as Bill T. Jones and Ralph Lemon, have dealt with their work being politicized. How do you feel about that? I’m not living with such an abundance

of privilege that I can’t see the injustices that are happening in this world. I would love to be in a place to make a dance about flowers and just be “pretty”—I think that’s also needed—but, for me, I’m trying to work out a lot of things in the work that I make. Luckily, I’m coming from a time where I was able to see artists like Bill T. Jones or Bebe Miller or Ralph Lemon or Ishmael Houston-Jones—this legacy of black dance-makers. I am aware of the responsibility and I’m also aware of how what I’m doing and saying can be read.

Your work is known for being about an awareness of the “self” in society. What work do you feel compelled to make at this moment of incredible strife in our country? I’m in the middle of a four-part process. The first work is really focused on black love. It’s premiering in 2020 and uses the music of D’Angelo. The next work, probably in 2022, is talking about black community, and that’s using Kendrick Lamar. The next is 2026, when we’re thinking about black folks’ relationship with faith and religion, and it’s all gospel music. From there, inspired by Ohad [Nahari-n]’s work, I’m taking the “B-side” sections that won’t make it to the actual evening-length piece of [those three works] and making them part of a fourth project.



On working with New York City Ballet, Abraham says, “I felt pressure to represent so many different worlds.”

Grooming: Mia Booker, Seese-Bey



Congratulations on your premiere of *The Runaway* with New York City Ballet. It's huge news for the dance community on many levels. Can you speak to your experience setting a work for a classical ballet company? I was definitely challenged by pointe work. I did feel like I had to choreograph *en pointe* because there was expectation, and there are also people that want to dismiss me, right? So, I had to attack it and just say, "Okay, I'm going to make some pointe work!" It may not be revolutionary, but I don't have to make a revolutionary dance. I just have to make a dance that goes over well and that represents me.

I noticed you used both contemporary and classical music in *The Runaway*. Was your own classical music background in cello and piano comforting and helpful when working with City Ballet? With the classical music, it was really funny. I mean, of course I can read music, but a lot of people didn't know much about my background and didn't actually know that. Although I often work with contemporary popular music, it doesn't mean that I don't know classical music or know how to work with measure, and all these different things.

You recently refused work on an all-male bill. That personal activism can be very powerful. It's kind of scary to think that these directors, a lot of times, are not going outside. They're just hearing a whisper from a friend in the elite boys' clubs, or waiting for a review of something—which is a really particular perspective on what's good and what's valid in the world. I think it's really, really important for directors and curators to realize that there is a major difference between highlighting and segregating. And that's what happens all too often. Having an all-women choreographer tribute one night is not integrating them into the program every night.

Collaboration seems particularly important to your work. I feel like a choreographer's job is the same as a host at a dinner party. You want to make sure everyone's having a good time. If you're so distracted by looking at negative energy or ego, it's taking away from the work. In working with my dancers as collaborators, I may be setting the steps—but I am in



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conversation. I'll have them write down their favorite section in a secret ballot. It gives me perspective to think about how they're viewing the importance of certain moments in that work. Their input influences what the work becomes.

You are one of the few dance companies that employs your dancers full time and provides health insurance. That can't be easy, or everyone would do it. Why did you feel that was important? I don't know if there's an eloquent answer. I can't even give the dancers what they deserve. They should be paid much more than they're paid and health insurance is something everyone should have. What's being asked of them is monumental. How do you not give them health insurance?

What kind of legacy would you like for your work? I want to make work that can stand up 10 years, 20 years, 50 years and 100 years from now. I don't really know if I've done that—I hope I have. I want people to be able to say, "Wow, in 2012 this black choreographer made a piece called *Pavement*. This is what was happening in America. And now in 2112, look where we are." It's important for us to be able to look back, you know?

Abraham has a rule of turning down offers to work on mixed bills that don't feature a woman choreographer. "Who's on the ground looking for new voices?" he asks.