

For a Young Choreographer, Bed-Stuy Is Home and a Stage

“Everything I need is right here,” Jordan Demetrius Lloyd said of his Brooklyn neighborhood. Add to that his new work, “Jerome,” staged in a schoolyard near his home.

By Charmaine Patricia Warren

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Call it a bold move. In his five years as a choreographer, Jordan Demetrius Lloyd has made dances for black box theaters and dances on film. But after two isolating years of pandemic life, he wanted to do something different, something that would honor his neighborhood, Bedford-Stuyvesant, in Brooklyn, and his neighbors.

They “gave me so much for two years while I was in deep isolation,” he said, and taught him that “everything I need is right here within my local neighborhood. I wanted to add dance productions to that list.”

That motivated Lloyd to self-produce his first evening of dance. He said he decided it had to be free, outdoors — and made for his neighbors, the people who might sit next to him and strike up a conversation on a park bench. That dance, “Jerome,” will be performed in the schoolyard at Stephen Decatur Middle School 35 on June 2 and 3.

Lloyd, 28, works with a small, revolving group of collaborators to make dances that are mostly narrative. He uses a rich mix of movement forms, including hip-hop, West African, contemporary modern and release.



Collaborators: from left, Breeanah Breeden, Kennedy Thomas, Mykel Marai Nairne, Wendell Gray II and Mia Martelli. Krisanne Johnson for The New York Times

“Jordan is an artist and, very importantly, a Black artist,” said the arts consultant Georgiana Pickett, who became Lloyd’s coach through MAP Fund’s Scaffolding for Practicing Artists, a partnership program with the Jerome Hill Fellowship. Pickett has also become a fan. In an email, she applauded his breaking out of the traditional theater setting. “Our parks, schoolyards, bodegas, street corners and stoops should be places of joy, discovery and comfort,” she said. “Jordan is one of the people making that happen.”

For the past five years Lloyd has lived at the corner of Halsey Street and Lewis Avenue in Bed-Stuy. In the early days of the pandemic, he said: “My parents didn’t want me on the trains, so I spent time in the parks. I became close with the people at the corner store run by a crew of Yemeni men, and Gizmo who runs her thrift store.”

On the occasions he has left Bed-Stuy in the past couple years, he went home to Albany, where he was born and where his parents still live. (Both parents, now retired, worked for the state.) On one trip, his mom helped him with the Jerome Foundation application.



Giving back: Lloyd said that his Bed-Stuy neighbors “gave me so much for two years while I was in deep isolation.” Krisanne Johnson for The New York Times

Lloyd said he remembered watching his mother in West African dance classes when he was 5: “That’s when I learned to put on a show.” His parents were supportive of his studying dance, and he received a bachelor’s degree from the S.U.N.Y. College at Brockport, in 2016. Since graduating, he has worked, collaborated and performed for Beth Gill, Netta Yerushalmy, David Dorfman Dance, Monica Bill Barnes and others, as well as creating his own dances.

Beginning in 2021, Lloyd has had a series of in-person residencies: at the Baryshnikov Arts Center, the Petronio Residency Center and Danspace Project. These gave him crucial support during the pandemic, even as they took him away from the neighborhood.

From the beginning, he said, he wanted to stage “Jerome” in a schoolyard in Bed-Stuy. That required building relationships and working out his logistical needs with city officials. “I’m not used to navigating city government,” he said — a different process with a different timeline than working with arts organizations. He talked to his assemblyman and his City Council representative, and was eventually given permission to use M.S. 35, just around the corner from where he lives.

He used money from a two-year, \$50,000 Jerome Hill Fellowship to pay his collaborators, money also gave him

the luxury of time. Lloyd is used to working quickly — he made his first dance in four weeks and has made two films since the pandemic began. But “Jerome” he had enough time to go back after he had finished and to give it a deeper look.



Lloyd said he hoped that viewers also saw the dancers like “a group of kids at recess.” From left, Martelli, José Lapaz Rodriguez, Thomas, Nairne and Breedon. Krisanne Johnson for The New York Times

For Lloyd, another bold, first-time move is that he is not dancing in the piece. By taking himself out, he said, he could add more bodies to the cast, and it feels good to be able to support other dancers: Breeanah Breedon, Wendell Gray II, Mia Martelli, Mykel Marai Nairne, José Lapaz Rodriguez and Kennedy Thomas. (The music is by Ryan Wolfe; costumes are by Maddie Schimmel.)

“I can feel all these different parts of myself forming and crystallizing in this work,” he said, “and I’m putting it in the middle of the concrete schoolyard where literally anyone can see it.”

Gray, one of Lloyd’s collaborators in “Jerome,” said he admired Lloyd’s diligence and his ability to do a lot of things at once. “Jordan choreographs every moment in the work that is in service to what the piece needs,” he said, and “he is also interested in who we are and how we fit into the work.”

For Gray, who has worked closely with Lloyd for five years, “Jerome” has become “a child, a mischievous person, imaginative, yet sometimes real and living around and within me.”

The dancers, performing in sneakers, with the backdrop of the sky and brick buildings, get to take up space. As a pack, and in long rhythmic sequences, they move in and out of unison, carving sharp angles, stopping with a jolt that reverberates from joint to joint. One or two might peel off from the pack, jog at full speed, slow down and riff off the rhythm of the group’s sequence in a solo or duet, and later rejoin. Others may flip open lawn

chairs, have a seat and just watch.



“It’s important that Black folks feel invited into this experience,” Lloyd said, “and that the piece could be about their brother, uncle or friend.” Krisanne Johnson for The New York Times

And why that title? “The name Jerome kept coming up during the process,” Lloyd said. And while he recognizes that “it’s problematic, or complicated, to determine someone’s race based on a name,” he said, “I feel Jerome is Black. And, given the location and place of the work, it’s important that Black folks feel invited into this experience, and that the piece could be about their brother, uncle or friend.”

Lloyd, who described “Jerome” as abstract and layered, said he hoped audiences would see the seriousness and whimsicality. “I also hope they see the artists as a group of kids at recess.”

In his five years of making dances, Lloyd has shown work only to dance audiences in conventional theaters. But for him, “Jerome” is more a community engagement project than an experiment in relocating concert dance.

“I’ve told a lot of my neighbors that I’m a dancer,” he said, “but they haven’t necessarily seen what I do. It’s my dream that we flood the park with Black folks that have been in Bed-Stuy for years.”

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