

Struggle, salvation revealed in classic work

Legendary dance company returns with Revelations, its signature creation

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN, VANCOUVER SUN MARCH 16, 2011

One of the world's great dance companies is coming to Vancouver to perform one of the great works of modern dance.

For the first time in 18 years, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will be taking to the stage at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre for three performances Friday and Saturday plus a dress rehearsal performance for students on Friday morning.

In all four performances, the company's 30 dancers will be performing Revelations, a work created by Alvin Ailey in 1960. Recognized as the company's signature work, Revelations uses dance and black spirituals to explore the African-American experience, according to artistic director Judith Jamison.

"Revelations is a classic work and it's understood all over the world because it happens to be about the human condition," she said.

"This work has been done more than any other modern dance -ever. We usually close with it because it is requested that we close with it. It grabs your heart and lifts you up and has been doing that for the last 50 years. We're hoping our audience makes noise because we're very used to that."

Revelations and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater are so intimately tied together it is impossible to think of one without the other. In that one work, Ailey was able to combine his personal memories with the social struggle of African-Americans in a way that tapped into something universal.

The start of Ailey's company illustrates the challenge faced by African-Americans in the U.S. after the Second World War.

"In 1958, there were many terrific black dancers in New York City, and yet, except for an occasional concert or art show, there was no place for them to dance," Ailey said in his autobiography Revelations, published six years after his death in 1995.

"There was practically no way for us to fulfil our compelling desire to participate fully in the dance world."

The opportunities were even more limited for African-American men like Ailey who wanted to be choreographers. So in classic American DIY style, he challenged the institutional limitations by starting his own company. His first performance for eight dancers took place in the Young Men's

Hebrew Association on 92nd Street in Manhattan.

Within two years, Ailey created Revelations. He said in his autobiography that the dance began with the music he heard being sung and performed in the "small black churches in every small Texas town my mother and I lived in.

"With profound feeling, with faith, hope, joy and sometimes sadness, the choirs, congregations, deacons, preachers and ushers would sing black spirituals and gospel songs. They sang and played the music with such fervour that even as a small child I could not only hear it but almost see it.

"I tried to put all of that feeling into Revelations."

When the dancers from AAADT step onto the stage to perform Revelations plus other works on the program, it will be the fourth time the company has visited Vancouver since first being brought here in 1976 by impresario David Y.H. Lui. The last time the main company was in Vancouver was 1993.

Four years ago, dance fans turned out to see the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble perform during the Vancouver International Dance Festival. Also called Ailey II, the touring company for dancers aged 18 to 22 was full of young, incredibly poised dancers who put on a show that brought usually reticent Vancouver audiences to their feet when they closed with Revelations.

Asked about the differences between the two companies, Jamison made it clear there is really no comparison.

"They're an incredible group of young people who are learning their chops," she said in a phone interview from Detroit.

"When you come to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, that is the professional theatre. It's the company -the premier company. The Ailey II is an entity to itself. You don't compare the two."

Before taking over the company from Ailey in 1989, Jamison already had a long career as a choreographer and dancer who spent a total of 15 years performing with the company. In her autobiography *Dancing Spirit*, she said she was able to continue Ailey's vision because he left her a "road map."

Jamison said the map she's been following involved celebrating dance and connecting with the community.

"That's what we've been following: Being enlightening and uplifting and celebrating our experience and showing people that dance can be as many different ways that you can imagine," she said.

"[Alvin] came up with the idea of repertory and celebrating the African-American cultural experience and expression in modern dance of our country. He believed that dance came from the people and

needed to be delivered back to the people."

Succeeding Jamison as the company's third artistic director is Robert Battle, who takes over in July. Jamison will become artistic director emerita but wouldn't say what she expects to do after Battle officially takes over. Battle is accompanying Jamison on her final tour with the company.

Among the works on the program in Vancouver will be Battle's *The Hunt*, which is performed by six male dancers. She said it's the kind of work guaranteed to provoke a response.

"It is more than intense, shall I say. Every single audience that sees it ends up screaming at the end," she said.

"He's an extraordinary choreographer. The reason I chose him is that he understands the past, present and future of this company. I think he'll do a fabulous job."

Also on the program is *Cry*, a solo originally created by Ailey for Jamison in 1971. It's dedicated to all African-American and black women, especially mothers.

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AT A GLANCE

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Where: Queen Elizabeth Theatre

When: Friday, March 18 at 8 p.m. and Saturday, March 19 at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m.

Tickets: \$40 to \$95 (including HST) with discounts for seniors, students and dance artists from ticketmaster.ca or 1-855-985-2787.

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