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weekend plus



Alvin Ailey

THE GREAT AMERICAN DANCE COMPANY RETURNS TO THE PARAMOUNT —
AND LAUNCHES A NEW YOUTH SUMMER CAMP IN SEATTLE > 3

COVER STORY



COURTESY MIKE STRONG

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will perform "Odetta," a tribute to the late musician and civil-rights leader, at the Paramount Theatre.

By MELODY DATZ HANSEN
Special to The Seattle Times

You probably danced on your way into work this morning. Every move you made, down to the rhythm of your steps, had a potential story to tell. And that, says Robert Battle, artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, is what dance is all about.

"Dance is something in our blood memory," Battle said by phone. "It's in our sense of retreat, the shift of our weight. I see the body dancing all the time, and as a choreographer I'm very inspired by that."

This week, the New York-based company brings a selection of work to Seattle's Paramount Theatre, including "Awakening," Battle's first choreographic creation since he began leading the company in 2011. As Battle describes in a promotional video, "Awakening" begins with a group of dancers sharply changing direction while

running to a corner of the stage and then dispersing. Throughout the piece, the dancers continually regroup in a clump, signifying, Battle says, a community "coming together because that's the only way they'll survive."

Now in its 58th year, the Ailey company will perform Battle's "Awakening," along with new pieces by Rennie Harris, Ronald K. Brown and Matthew Rushing; a piece by contemporary dance pioneer Paul Taylor; and the beloved Ailey dances "Revelations" and "Love Songs."

"Revelations," often cited as Ailey's signature work, is set to spiritual and blues music and

DANCE PREVIEW

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, April 15-16, and 2 p.m. Sunday, April 17, at the Paramount Theatre, 911 Pine St., Seattle; \$35-\$138 (877-784-4849 or stgprepresents.org).

tells a story of slavery and freedom. Rushing's "Odetta" pays tribute to the life of singer/songwriter/civil-rights leader Odetta Holmes. Robert Battle described "Exodus," the new work by Rennie Harris, as a meld of hip-hop

and contemporary dance that deals with issues such as police brutality that "have been going on for a long time but are now on the consciousness of the people in a way it hasn't been in a while."

When Alvin Ailey started the company in 1958, America's modern-dance scene was exploding and much of the choreography was rooted in African dance—but this history and the people who lived it weren't onstage.

As the Ailey company grew in prominence, so did Ailey's efforts to preserve African-American cultural experiences in dance, as well as integrate the communi-

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ties from which the movements were born into a growing performance culture.

In a 1983 New York Times interview, six years before he died, Ailey said: "I believe that the dance came from the people, and should always be delivered back to the people."

In 1969, he established the Ailey

School, which now educates dancers of all levels, from youth to professionals.

AileyCamp, a summer program for children ages 11-14, debuted in 1989 and is making its first Seattle appearance in partnership with Seattle Theater Group in honor of Seattle/Tacoma native Calvin Hunt, a much-beloved performance director with the Ailey company who died unexpectedly in 2014. Seattle's AileyCamp is its ninth

iteration in the U.S. and will serve local students who applied over the winter for coveted spots in the popular education program.

Nasha Thomas, the national director for AileyCamp and a former dancer with Ailey's company, said the program isn't just about teaching kids to dance. It's also about giving them the tools to succeed: "It's really about giving young people life skills," she said, "with dance as a vehicle."

In addition to dance classes, campers will take a personal-development class that includes conversations about peer pressure, conflict resolution and how to interact with people who have differences of opinion and ideas.

"It gets kids to open up and explore how they look at the world," Thomas said. "Once they get that, the movements come more easily. Some of our students are living in shelters, or they are being raised by

a single parent, have lots of siblings, maybe have low self-esteem." (AileyCamp is free for participants and supported by donations.)

The origins of modern dance, Battle said, have a strong component of social justice: "It concerns itself with being seen and heard, it can enlighten and entertain, and getting those messages across is a cornerstone of modern dance."

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