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[Alvin Ailey 'Survivors' a tribute to Mandela](#)

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ARTS &
ENTERTAINMENT
DANCE



Nelson Mandela was still in prison in 1986 when Alvin Ailey's "Survivors" debuted, coinciding with worldwide rallies for Mandela's freedom.

COURTESY OF PAUL KOLNIK

Alvin Ailey's 'Survivors' a tribute to Mandelas

Dance about speaking against the taking away of a human's rights.

By Cynthia Perry
For the AJC

Robert Battle was four years into his artistic directorship of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and still he sometimes questioned whether or not he belonged there. Former Ailey artistic director Judith Jamison had handpicked Battle to succeed her, but he hadn't known Alvin Ailey and had never danced with his company. Then something occurred during the company's 2015 tour of South Africa that changed all that.

The company performed and taught dance classes in cities and townships across the country. They visited the Robben Island prison cell that restrained Nelson Mandela for 18 years of his 27-year imprisonment for opposing apartheid, the South African government's brutally enforced

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» DANCE PREVIEW «

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Feb. 16-19, Programs vary;
"Survivors" will be performed
Thursday and Saturday
nights. "Revelations" will
be performed at all shows.
\$29-\$89. Fox Theatre, 660
Peachtree St. NE, Atlanta.
855-285-8499. foxtheatre.
org.



Choreographed by Alile and Mary Barnett, "Survivors" is a tribute to the courage and suffering of Nelson and Winnie Mandela in their struggle against apartheid, which will be performed Feb. 16-19 at the Fox Theatre in Atlanta. PHOTOS COURTESY OF PAUL KOLNIK

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system of segregation.

One evening at a reception at the U.S. Ambassador's residence in Pretoria, John Kani, the South African actor, director, playwright and activist, approached Battle and embraced him.

In a deep, resonant African lilt, Kani told Battle: Four hundred years ago, I was your brother. We were on the beach. They came for us. They took you. They left me. Four hundred years later, you returned. You look the same.

In that moment, Battle felt a sense of belonging to a place, a people and a cause to fight social injustice. He felt close to Mandela. And that lit the spark that led to the restaging of Alvin Ailey's "Survivors," a tribute to the courage and suffering of Nelson and Winnie Mandela in their struggle against apartheid.

Choreographed in 1986 by Ailey and Mary Barnett, "Survivors" is part of a performance run at the Fox Theatre Feb. 16-19 that includes company premieres by Twyla Tharp and Alvin Ailey, world premieres by Kyle Abraham and Jamar Roberts, plus repertory works by Ailey and Battle.

Lots of people associate Ailey with "Revelations," his 1960 masterpiece that closes most every Ailey performance. "He's telling a hard truth about faith and hope over despair, but he does it in a way that is both profound, inviting and elegant," said Battle. By comparison, "Survivors" is riveting because Ailey didn't smooth out the edges.

Battle recalled a 1988 excerpt from "Survivors" filmed in a dark, gritty prison cell. It showed a different timbre of Ailey's voice, unlike the choreographer's popular, accessible works.

"It had this kind of tactile rawness to it," Battle said. Set in part to Max Roach's "Triptych," the jazz drummer's slow and mournful rhythm underscores Abbey Lincoln's haunting vocalizations



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that suggest moaning and at times, said Battle, "a guttural scream." Battle sensed Ailey's rage about what was going on in South Africa. Here was a chance to show a side of Ailey that few had seen.

"Survivors" also shows how Ailey resisted pressure from sponsors to compromise his ideals by creating only crowd-pleasing works that didn't challenge the status quo.

"Before the notion of Black Lives Matter took the form of words," said Battle, Ailey "was the living embodiment of it."

If Mandela's activism influenced Ailey, Mandela himself drew inspiration from Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi, a Xhosa poet and historian whose electrifying performance of poetry and tribal dance at Healdtown College launched young Mandela on his path to fight injustice.

Mandela was still in prison in 1986 when Ailey's "Survivors" debuted, coinciding with worldwide rallies for Mandela's freedom. About the emotionally charged work, Ailey's biographer Jennifer Dunning wrote that "Ailey's intense feelings about racial equality were more clearly stated than ever before."

Based on Nelson and Winnie Mandela's relationship, "Survivors" is both personal and a universal statement about injustice. Ailey sought to tell a story about the activist couple but not in a purely literal, narrative sense.

"This piece is a kind of compendium and abstraction of my rage, an abstraction of that frustration, that anger, that pain," Ailey told the Los Angeles Times in 1987. "I was trying to go into the interior of the situation, to the feelings, to say something

beyond what we already know about what's going on there."

To melodic rise and fall of Lincoln's potent vocalizations, hints of spirituals and blues surge upward and drop into deep and sometimes otherworldly utterances. The dancers—a man and a woman—embrace through the bars, then lean in opposite directions as if forces were pulling them apart. Near the end, she begins a strident walk and exits behind him alone. Slowly, he reaches through the bars, fingers splayed, then resolutely folds them one by one into a fist as the sound of slow, deep breathing suggests an entire people waiting in darkness, summoning strength for the moment of liberation.

"Survivors" was the hit of the Ailey company's 1986 season, wrote Dunning.

"It's an emotional and very physical piece," said Nasha Thomas, national director of AileyCamp, who performed in the original cast. "There's a gut-wrenching, in-the-ground emotional depth that you have to pull out of yourself to bring the story out."

Some people responded to the work with threats of violence. While on tour, the company received bomb threats in response to "Survivors" in Detroit and other cities.

During a stop in Clearwater, Florida, the theater received a phone call saying there would be a shooting if the performance proceeded. Company union representatives advised them not to perform.

Ailey called a company meeting. "We decided we didn't want to be silent," Thomas said. "That's what this piece is about—speaking out about the taking away of a human's right. Standing up for what you believe in, that everyone is equal, was very important for Mr. Ailey to say." The show went on without incident.

Now secure in his role after 11 successful years, Battle hopes "Survivors" will inspire audience members to learn more about South Africans' fight for human rights and to be alert to social injustice whenever and wherever it happens. Noting that the era of Jim Crow laws and the brutal murder of Emmett Till weren't that long ago, Battle said, "The fragility of our democracy is prevalent."

"Survivors" also reminds Battle of that encounter in South Africa that gave him a profound sense of connection with a lineage of artists and activists, including Mqhayi, Mandela, Kani and Ailey. "It's both personal and larger than myself," he said of his role with the dance company. "Often feel like a vessel for those ancestors, for Alvin Ailey, to continue to teach us, to provoke us, to inspire us. And for me to have that opportunity to ultimately bring Mr. Ailey into the room."