



Kyle Abraham celebrates Black culture in upcoming Alvin Ailey performances

By: Kathleen Wessel

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Forget Valentine's Day (and your hopeless attempt to secure a restaurant reservation this late). February is also Black History Month, and for many Atlanta dance goers, it is synonymous with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Year after year, the company packs the house, attracting groupies, first-timers and everyone in between.

Revelations, Mr. Ailey's 1960 masterpiece set to a suite of African American spirituals and gospel songs, is the main draw. The iconic work, which has been performed thousands of times for millions of viewers, will close each of the three programs presented over five performances [February 16-19 at the Fox Theatre](#).



With *Revelations* anchoring nearly every Ailey company performance, the other works on the program can be mistaken for mere appetizers to the main course. But the Ailey legacy runs deep and has inspired a generation of choreographers to carry forth the founder's vision: to preserve the uniqueness of Black culture on the concert stage through dance. Among those is acclaimed choreographer Kyle Abraham, whose new work *Are You in Your Feelings?*, his third for the Ailey company, debuted at New York City Center in December and will see its Atlanta premiere this weekend.

How does a young choreographer approach the daunting task of creating a new work for a company with such a rich history? Upon receiving his first Ailey commission in 2012, Abraham, now 45, carefully considered this question. He says he wanted to introduce himself to Ailey audiences "in a way that wouldn't have them running for the hills."

At the time, he was working with his own company, A.I.M., on *Pavement*, a work that addressed the dilapidation of historically Black neighborhoods in Pittsburgh — Abraham's hometown — in part because of the influx of crack cocaine in the early '90s. (*Pavement* made its [Atlanta debut](#) in 2014 at Georgia Tech's Ferst Center for the Arts). He was also interested in exploring the American incarceration system and its impact on Black families with a work that would become *Untitled America*. For the Ailey commission, instead of pursuing darker themes, Abraham says he chose "to focus on the thriving moments in our history" with the joyful *Another Night*.

A year later, in 2013, Abraham received a coveted MacArthur Fellowship, and in 2016 he premiered *Untitled America* on the Ailey company. He says making the work was a heavy emotional lift for the dancers, and he intended his next commission, *Are You in Your Feelings?*, to be a gift and a welcome respite. If the dancers cried during the creation and performance of *Feelings*, he hoped they would cry tears of joy.

"Having made several works that dealt with the injustices of people who live and/or look like me, I wanted to switch the ways in which I'm addressing our power," says Abraham. That shift resulted in the generation of both *An Untitled Love*, a "creative exaltation" set to the music of R&B legend D'Angelo for A.I.M., (performed at the Ferst Center for one night only in November 2022) and *Feelings*, which features a mixtape of breakup songs by artists such as Jazmine Sullivan and Erykah Badu.

With these works, Abraham says he intended to focus on "how we love and the richness within our culture." He adds that, for him, works of art that celebrate Black love and strength are "just as Black, if not more so" than those highlighting injustices.



As always, a love of music permeates Abrahams' works. Nineties hip-hop and R&B both hold a special place in his heart. In addition to D'Angelo, he draws inspiration from greats like Brandy and the Fugees, "artists who are earnestly connected to the history of soul music and the love that's in that music." *Feelings*, he says, is an ode to the mixtape and "probably the most pointedly FUBU [for us, by us] dance I've ever made." He hopes the song choices will evoke vocal affirmations in the theater and draw a few exclamations of "oooh that's my *song*!"

In addition to *Feelings*, the Ailey engagement this year features works choreographed over a span of more than six decades: from *Revelations* to resident choreographer Jamar Roberts' *In a Sentimental Mood*, a 2022 world premiere. Also on the program is the revival of Mr. Ailey's *Survivors* (1986), an homage to Nelson and Winnie Mandela, which has not been presented publicly since 1988. Jazz music fans will relish Twyla Tharp's *Roy's Joys* (1997) set to a suite of 1940s and '50s tracks by Roy Eldridge, and Ailey artistic director Robert Battle's *For Four* (2021), which features the sounds of jazz legend Wynton Marsalis. A family matinee performance on Saturday includes Battle's duet *Unfold* (2005) and *Night Creature* (1974), one of Mr. Ailey's most popular works.

As the Ailey company's range of choreographic voices illustrates, Blackness is not a monolith. Abraham says the program this year asserts "we can be different while also being connected." Mr. Ailey's vision lives on.