



## Alvin Ailey 'Invites Audience into a Conversation' Through Dance

By: Alex Greene

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When the [Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater](#) opens its latest touring show at the Orpheum Theatre this Friday, March 3, it's bringing more than entertainment: it's a whole way of looking at the world, and our own history. [The company's repertory](#) has always taken on such major themes, and this year's iteration is no different.

To dig deeper into the programming this time around, the *Memphis Flyer* reached out to dancer Khalia Campbell, who figures prominently in both the classic *Revelations* and the more recent *In a Sentimental Mood*, now enjoying its world premiere on this tour.

*Memphis Flyer: How long have you been with Alvin Ailey?*

Khalia Campbell: It's now my fifth season with the company. I've been in Memphis with them before, in 2018 when I first joined the company. It was a very memorable experience for me: It was a really great crowd, and it was my first tour, so everything was heightened, the experience. I remember going out with my friends to eat and Memphis really treated us well. It was a really good experience being there, so I'm excited to be back!

*It seems there's special care taken with the music in Ailey productions.*

Yeah. We have a new work, a world premiere called *Are You In Your Feelings?* by Kyle Abraham, an acclaimed choreographer, and it's really about Black culture and Black music, with a youthful feel to it. It's like a mixtape. He made a collection of all these amazing songs, R&B songs. From way back in the '80s all the way to the present day. There's Jazmine Sullivan, there's Kendrick Lamar, there's Maxwell, and so many songs that people know, that we just listen to on a daily basis. It's just great to be able to dance to good music that you could just listen to on a car ride. So that's one example of the music playing a great role in this year's rep.

On the other hand, *Revelations* is based on Negro Spirituals, and they too really speak to the Black experience, just as *Are You In Your Feelings?* does. The music we dance to speaks a lot about Black culture, and the importance of faith to us, to persevere through hard times. So *Revelations* really takes you from tragedy to triumph. It's like a movie, talking about us as a culture, but also about all human struggle through trials and tribulations. The music speaks to the universal experience.

*Regarding Revelations, which first premiered in 1960: is it intimidating to take on this kind of hallowed piece?*

It's not difficult at all. Dancing *Revelations* does have a weight to it, because it's about the Black experience, and legends in the dance world have performed it. Like, I do a role that Miss Judith Jamison once performed. So there's a weight to it, but I'm not intimidated by it. It is a responsibility, and an honor, and a privilege to be able to continue this legacy that Ailey has given us. We're still on his shoulders, still dancing a work that was created in 1960. And it's still relevant today. The human experience is still the same, especially for African Americans today. We still are dealing with racism and discrimination. So I can put my own experience into it and still honor the work's integrity. When I first saw the company and saw this piece, I saw myself. From growing up in the Black church and beyond.

*I always wondered about how much it evolved over the years. Has it changed at all since 1960?*

When he first created it, there were fewer people. And the steps have evolved a little bit. And the set may have changed a little, too, but the overall heart of the piece is still the same. The music lineup is the same, though a different choir is singing the songs. The old tapes sound different. And the dance has evolved since then. It's still the same steps, but maybe there's a higher leg, or there are more turns now. Different subtle changes.

*Dance is always dependent on music, but did the late Alvin Ailey, as the company's founder, bring a special understanding of music to the organization?*

Alvin Ailey loved music. He specifically loved Duke Ellington. There are a lot of dances that we perform to Ellington's music, and there's a beautiful contrast between the movement and the music, and how they come together. Ailey really played with that.

*The piece In a Sentimental Mood must be built around Ellington's music.*

Yes, it is! And Jamar Roberts, the choreographer, and also a former member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, wanted it to be a modernized version of *Blues Suite*, which was a work by Mr. Ailey. It's an intimate scene, of two people coming back to revisit a relationship. And the music plays a big part in setting the mood. I really look forward to performing it in Memphis. It allows me to tap into my experiences, of being in a relationship, or of being in future relationships, and the kinds of conversations I want to have. It allows you to tap into real life experiences. We do that a lot in Ailey's work, but Jamar's work has really allowed me to just go there and get lost in that piece.

*It uses a lesser known work by Ellington, "The Single Petal of a Rose."*

Yeah it does. Dance is a universal language and when it's done with music people enjoy, it allows them to engage with the overall experience more. And the works this year feature some fantastic music, and will really allow the audience to engage with the experience with us.

*The audience response to Ailey shows here in the past has been really enthusiastic.*

Yeah, and that's what Mr. Ailey always wanted. His most famous quote was, 'Dance came from the people, it shall always be delivered back to the people.' He wanted his works to speak to real life experiences, to speak to the soul, to the spirit. And that's one way that Mr. Ailey really stands out from other modern dancers. It speaks to the soul. Even the music he chose. It helps the audience members come into an experience, instead of just watching for entertainment. More than 'Oh, that was nice,' you really feel changed. Like, that was just a whole experience. And I would love more art to be about that. Inviting the audience into a conversation with the performers.

*There's also some really fine jazz showcased on this tour. Wynton Marsalis, Roy Eldridge in a Twyla Tharpe piece, Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln in Survivors. Has the use of really fine jazz been a through-line in Ailey pieces?*

Yes. Again, Mr. Ailey loved Duke Ellington. We have *Pas de Duke* and *Night Creatures* and other jazz pieces. We've had whole programs devoted just to Ailey's work and Duke Ellington. So there is a through line of Mr. Ailey working with really great music. And for dancers, that's all you could ask for.

I think Ailey had respect for all genres of music and dance, and that's why we're a repertory company, because we do everything, from House music to jazz to Martha Graham-like modern dance music. We've done Afro-Centric work, like one called *Shelter*. Ronald K. Brown is one African-inspired choreographer we've worked with. So I think we have so many choreographers, including European choreographers, that we want to pay respect to the art. Ailey appreciated all genres of dance. And it expands our arsenal, our creativity, and artistry. And Ailey wanted his dancers to be very versatile.

It's definitely challenging, but it keeps me motivated, it keeps me inspired and engaged. And one thing I love about Ailey is, I get to wear different hats every night. I play different roles every night. I tap into different techniques of dance. And that's what you need to grow. Just doing one thing would lead to complacency. But at Ailey I've become a better artist because I'm able to dive into all these different techniques and genres of dance.

*The program for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Orpheum engagement includes:*

*Friday, March 3:*

[\*In a Sentimental Mood\*](#) / [\*For Four\*](#) / [\*Are You in Your Feelings?\*](#) / [\*Revelations\*](#)

*Saturday, March 4:*

[\*Roy's Joys\*](#) / [\*Survivors\*](#) / [\*Revelations\*](#)

*Sunday, March 5 (Matinee):*

[\*In a Sentimental Mood\*](#) / [\*For Four\*](#) / [\*Are You in Your Feelings?\*](#) / [\*Revelations\*](#)

*The company will also be engaging in lecture demonstrations for local schools and through a free community dance workshop open to all ages and abilities. Tickets, registration for the lecture demonstrations, and attendee registration for the free community workshop can be found at [orpheum-memphis.com](http://orpheum-memphis.com).*