

Alvin Ailey choreographer finds inspiration in King's speech

By: Cynthia Bond Perry

February 2, 2017



Hope Boykin, long-time member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, returned to the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in January, wondering if she'd have the same rendezvous with inspiration she'd had two years earlier.

She'd just taught a master class at the museum, part of the Ailey company's new Destination Dance initiative to offer year-round local programming in partnership with several Atlanta cultural organizations.

The museum had closed for the day, so Boykin knew she'd be alone in the space where Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches and sermons had first inspired her to create "r-Evolution, Dream."

She went to the room where footage of King's funeral plays, with a voiceover recording of his sermon, "The Drum Major Instinct." She'd heard the sermon countless times as she developed her ballet's choreography, text and original score. To her delight, Boykin still felt inspired and even more receptive, she said, "to his words, to the weight of his person, the meaning behind the things that he said."

"r-Evolution, Dream" will appear during the Ailey troupe's annual performance run at the Fox Theatre, Feb. 15-19, on the company's "Ailey Jazz" program alongside tributes to Ella Fitzgerald and Dizzy Gillespie. With a focus on social issues, this season will also include the Atlanta premiere of Kyle Abraham's "Untitled America" on the impact of the prison system on African-American families. Also featured are Mauro Bigonzetti's "Deep," to music by Franco-Cuban duo Ibeyi, and Alvin Ailey's "Masekela Language," a portrait of South African apartheid and 1960s violence in Chicago. Each program will conclude with Ailey's "Revelations."

"r-Evolution, Dream" is a major step in Boykin's evolution as a creative artist and an example of how a younger generation can find contemporary relevance in a seismic moment in history, made palpable through the museum's interactive installations.

Now in her 17th season with Ailey, Boykin carries a striking presence. Compact at five-foot-two, with a shaved head, Boykin is composed but possessing inner fire — powerfully centered, yet warm and approachable. In Matthew Rushing's 2015 tribute to civil rights activist Odetta Holmes, Boykin embodied the singer's mobilizing power with radiance and unshakable strength.

Boykin was performing as Odetta two years ago when she toured the museum's exhibition on the American civil rights movement. It's a tactile, tangible series of installations that surrounds visitors with sensations. Boykin sat at a lunch counter in the museum, just as non-violent protesters did in the 1960s. Through headphones, she heard the harsh verbal harassment that protesters were subject to.

"I remember feeling uncomfortable, because my mother was a part of this time," said Boykin, who's originally from North Carolina, where lunch counter protests began. "It made the stories I grew up with even more real."

Boykin thought of her grandfather, who put his children through college by working as a mechanic, bookkeeper and filling station attendant at a business owned by a less-educated white family. Boykin recalled stories of her great-

grandmother, who was a nanny and housekeeper for a white family during the week, then returned home on weekends to be with her own two children, essentially raising two families.

“That’s a reality of a time I have no idea about,” Boykin said. “I am privileged. I’ve been influenced. I’ve traveled. I saw that I’ve been given this broad scope, (that) you can do anything that you set your mind to. Because someone fought for that. For me.”



When Boykin first entered the museum space where film footage of King’s funeral was shown, the voiceover recording of his familiar “Drum Major Instinct” sermon landed differently in her spirit this time.

“Is he speaking to me, watching what’s going on in the world?” Boykin wondered.

“I’ve got to try to move to this thing,” she thought.

Boykin downloaded the sermons, read them and listened to them. She immersed herself in his language as she worked out movement phrases in the studio, expanding the personal style she calls “Hope stuff.”

Boykin built a series of 11 vignettes based on personal memories, stories she’d heard growing up and people she’d known. Ali Jackson, a friend, artistic collaborator and principal drum chair with Jazz at Lincoln Center, composed the score, drawing inspiration from King’s oratory.

Jackson studied the architecture of “The Drum Major Instinct.” He took the most impactful portion and accompanied it with some of the rhythmic motifs and the cadence of King’s speaking, Jackson said, “along with the emotional arc and intensity of King’s speech.”

Boykin recruited another friend — Leslie Odom Jr. of the Broadway musical “Hamilton” — to narrate a selection of original writings as well as historic texts that King quoted, including verses by Shakespeare, William Cowper and Isaac Watts.

For two years, “r-Evolution, Dream” has been part of Boykin’s daily search in her evolution as an artist and creator. She feels confident in its honesty and hopes audiences may see part of themselves in the ballet. “If they see something that makes them happy or curious,” she said, “or question something, then I’m good.”

In the piece’s title, Boykin capitalizes the E in “revolution” to emphasize the idea that true social change comes from each individual striving to evolve — a positive action that influences others to do the same.

“If we change enough, if we love enough,” Boykin said, “if we allow ourselves to be transformed, then we don’t have to fight, per se, but we can share our personal evolution. And that leads to revolution.”

DANCE PREVIEW

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.



Feb. 15-19. Programs vary. 8 p.m. Wednesday-Friday; 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday; 3 p.m. Sunday. \$25-\$90 plus fees. Fox Theatre, 660 Peachtree St. N.E., Atlanta. foxtheatre.org.

For more info on programming, workshops, special offers and discounts, visit www.alvinailey.org/engagement/atlanta-2017.