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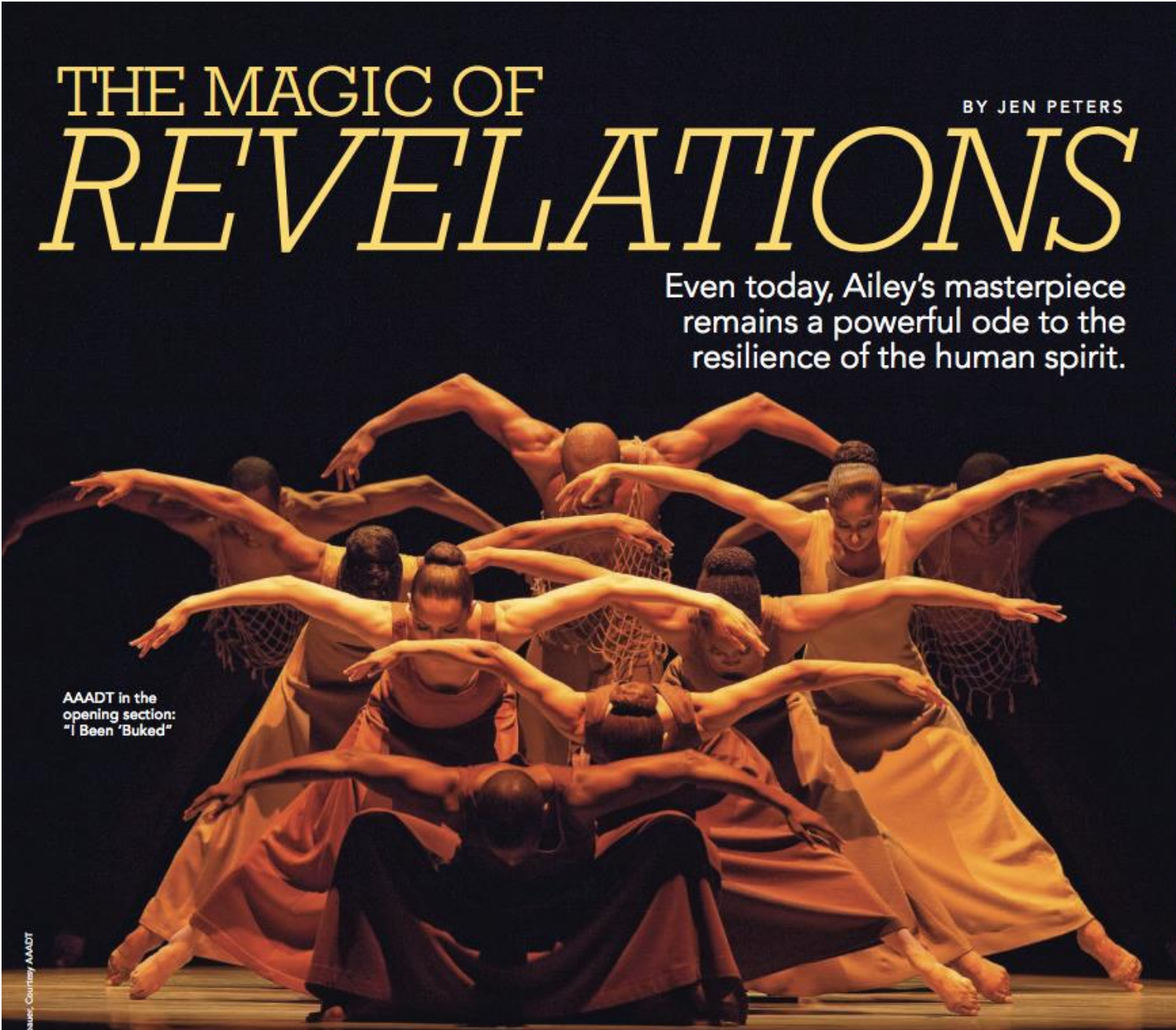


Judith Jamison: "I haven't danced it in years, but I remember every step I ever learned."

THE MAGIC OF *REVELATIONS*

BY JEN PETERS

Even today, Ailey's masterpiece remains a powerful ode to the resilience of the human spirit.



AAADT in the opening section: "I Been 'Buked"

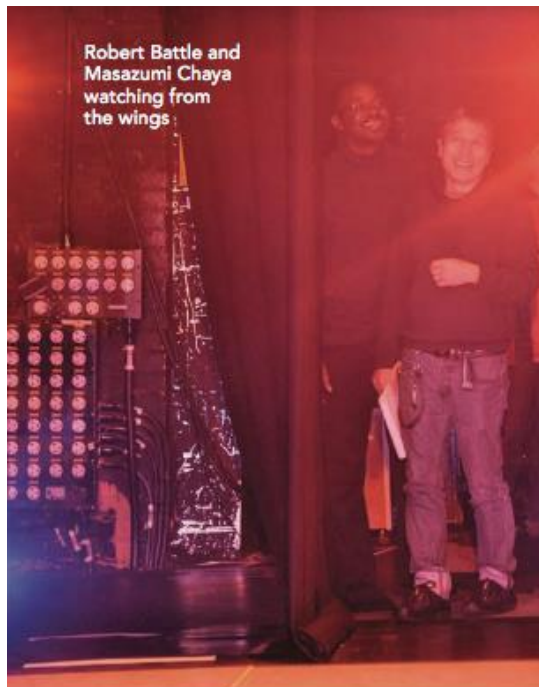
In 1960, America was in the midst of a social transformation. The Supreme Court had ruled "separate but equal" unconstitutional six years prior, but the country's response was slow and turbulent as desegregation incited violent responses. Surrounded by powerful civil rights momentum, a 29-year-old Alvin Ailey created an ode to the resilience of the human spirit: *Revelations*. "Alvin was making a statement about African-American cultural experience, saying, 'Hey, this is who we are, we live here, we were born here,'" says Judith Jamison, artistic director emerita of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. "It was a brave action. Civil rights were roaring, and our protest was our performance."

Even today, *Revelations* presents a compelling plea for society through its renderings of the highs and lows of our human condition.

"When I look at recent events in this country and hear rhetoric that is more than a throwback to the Jim Crow era," says current AAADT artistic director Robert Battle, "I know that now, more than ever, *Revelations* is urgently needed."

The piece has made a profound impact. AAADT dancers perform *Revelations* hundreds, even thousands, of times in the course of their careers. Their bodies carry not only the steps, but the weight and historical relevance of the piece. "I haven't danced it in years, but I remember every step I ever learned," says Jamison, whose performances as the umbrella woman helped propel her to stardom. "You feel whole by the time the curtain comes down. No matter how many times you perform or see it, it lifts you." ▶

Robert Battle and Masazumi Chaya watching from the wings



THE BIRTH OF A MASTERWORK

While creating *Revelations*—one of his earliest works—Ailey was searching for personal, artistic and cultural identity. He investigated what he described as his ancestral “blood memories,” and his personal history growing up an only child in rural segregated Texas, attending Baptist churches with his single mother, being overwhelmed by spiritual gospel music. Divided into three sections, his narrative journeys through a mournful “Pilgrim of Sorrow”; the baptismal second section, “Take Me to the Water”; and “Move Members, Move,” depicting an uplifting spiritual community.

“*Revelations* began with the music. As early as I can remember I was enthralled by

the music played and sung in small black churches,” Ailey described in his memoir *Revelations: The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey*. He wrote that he was also stirred by the sculptures of Henry Moore, the writings of Langston Hughes, and the technical elements of Martha Graham and his mentor Lester Horton: “Moore’s work inspired the costumes made of jersey in the first part. When the body moves, the jersey takes on extraordinary tensions.”

The piece premiered in New York City at the 92nd Street Y on Sunday, January 31, 1960, with nine dancers including Ailey, and live musicians. “The theater was packed,” recalls Sylvia Waters, a former Ailey II director, and current director of the Ailey Legacy Residency. “I was in the balcony, and when the curtain came down there was a moment of silence and then an eruption of clapping, stamping...it was huge!” The original version was a full hour, which Ailey said he then “snipped, cut, pushed and pulled down to a half hour.”

THE SNAG TO SUCCESS

Reaching the pinnacle of his choreographic career early on, Ailey struggled at times with his personal relationship to *Revelations*. “He sometimes referred to *Revelations* as ‘the albatross around his neck,’” says Waters. “He was frustrated, always being put in that box, because he created 79 ballets and many thought this was the only piece he ever created!”

PASSING IT ON

As *Revelations* approaches 60 years of nearly uninterrupted performances, Ailey’s hopeful message continues to spread. “Alvin Ailey was able to create a work about faith in God, yet it transcends religion,” says Battle. “*Revelations* has a way of breaking through spiritual and language barriers.”

Battle has witnessed the passing of the torch firsthand since becoming director in 2011. “I see new dancers in their first performance, or longtime dancers moving into iconic roles—it connects them to the past, to Alvin Ailey himself. It is a powerful, moving experience,” says Battle, who sometimes marks the movement in the wings to interplay with the dancers. “I never danced *Revelations* myself, so [associate artistic director Masazumi] Chaya has threatened to put me into ‘yellow section’ at some point...I humbly decline!” ■

Jen Peters is a frequent contributor to Dance Magazine.

MOST MEMORABLE AUDIENCE REACTIONS

“When we used to perform with live music, I remember audience members bringing tambourines and playing along. They were ready like it was church!” —JUDITH JAMISON

“In South Africa for the first time, we finished *Revelations* and the audience was clapping, then they started pounding their feet in unison, which we experience in Europe often. But then they started chanting something in unison, and to this day we still don’t know what it was! It was a really spiritual experience.” —MATTHEW RUSHING

“Once, in Germany, we had already gone offstage and into our dressing rooms. I was about to take my eyelashes off, but the audience kept going, so Mr. Ailey had us do an encore, and all the bows, several times. They closed the curtain, they opened it again—it went on for 15, maybe 20 minutes. We finally put our heads in our hands, like ‘We are tired.’ They had to lower the metal fire curtain!”

—JUDITH JAMISON

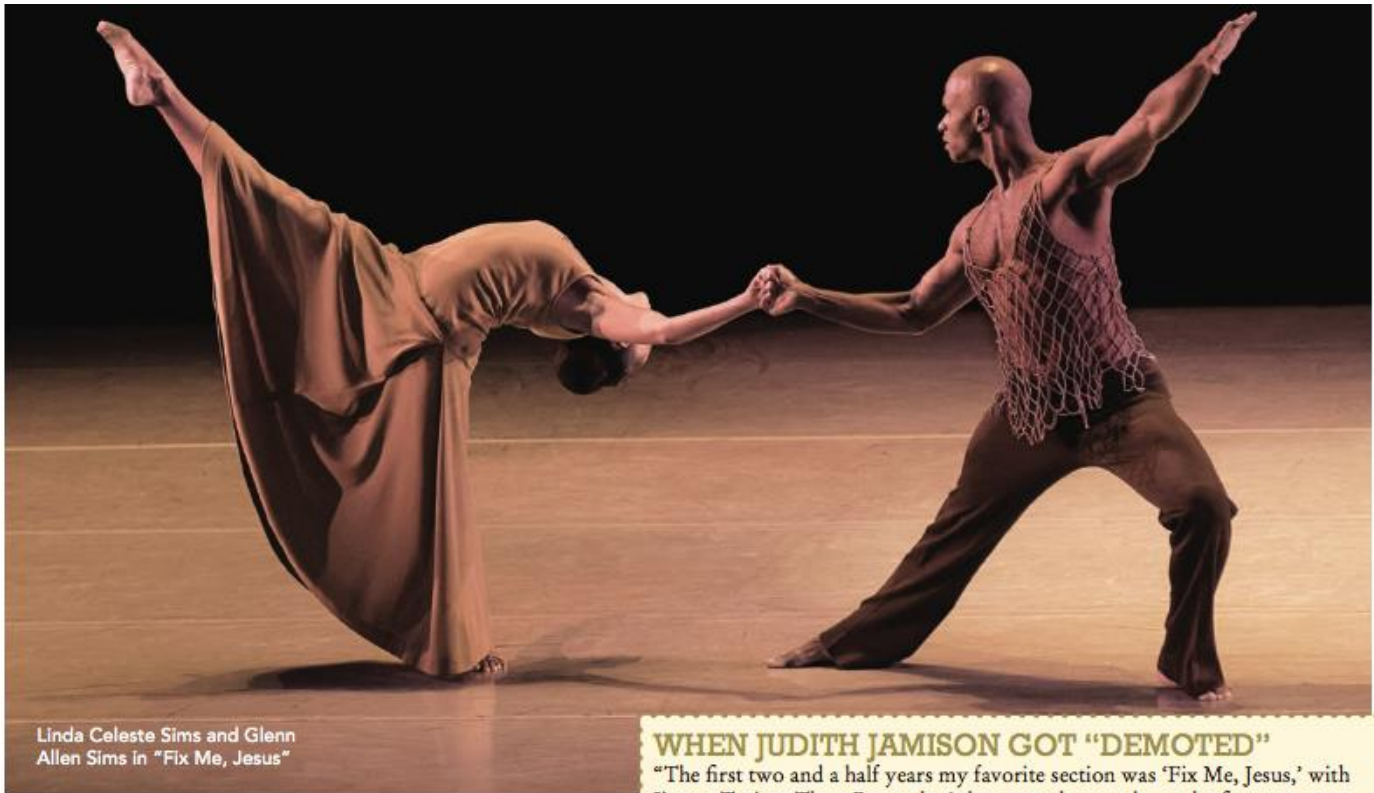
The “yellow section”



REVELATIONS AS TEACHER

Over the years, the piece has become a powerful teaching tool. Ailey’s Arts in Education & Community Programs created a children’s school residency, *Revelations: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Aimed at grades 6–8, the program uses Ailey’s life and *Revelations* to tie dance to language arts, social studies and even math through phrasing and counting. It also teaches movement from “I Been ’Buked,” “Rocka My Soul” and sometimes “Wade in the Water.”

“We examine the decade of 1960 to 1970, look at American history, world history, ask students to interview family members about their personal history,” explains Nasha Thomas, who runs the program. “They write and share stories. They like seeing how much they may have in common with Mr. Ailey.” —JP



Linda Celeste Sims and Glenn Allen Sims in "Fix Me, Jesus"

WHEN JUDITH JAMISON GOT "DEMOTED"

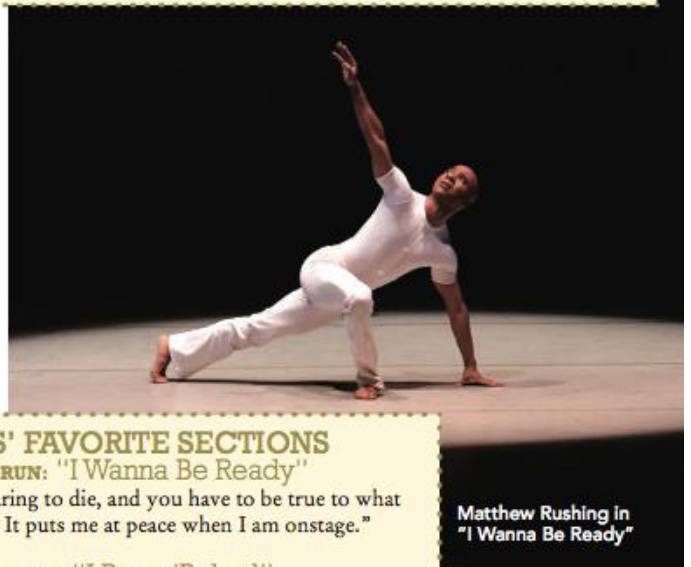
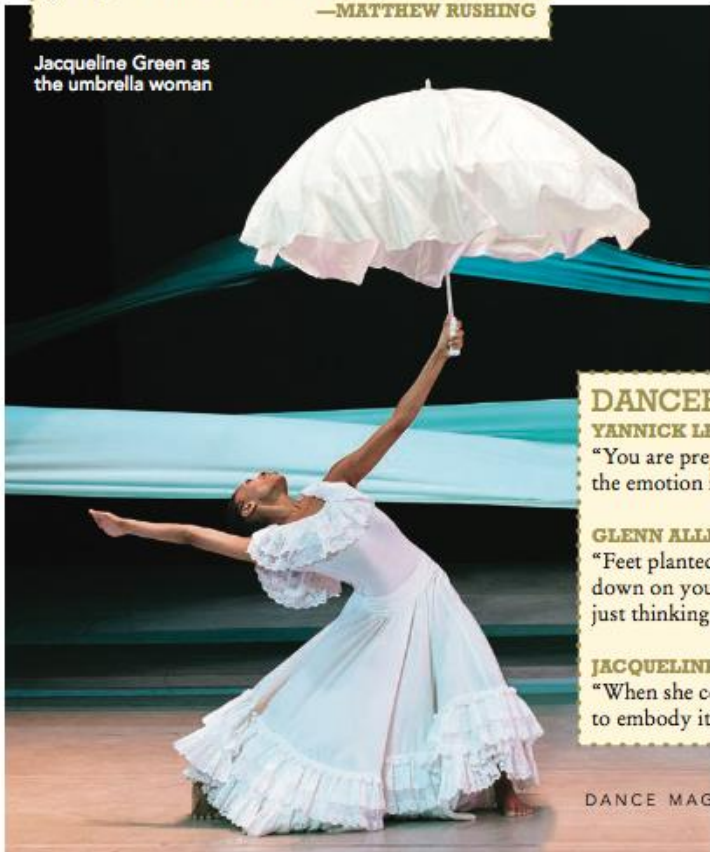
"The first two and a half years my favorite section was 'Fix Me, Jesus,' with Jimmy Truitte. Then Consuelo Atlas came along and was the first person to go past the T and into an arch, but I couldn't do that, so I got 'demoted' to carrying a prop...I was so mad! But I came out with that umbrella and a smile on my face. I felt lifted as I was running. Even though I was mad two seconds before, it was divine! I forgot about everything else." —JUDITH JAMISON

THE PRE-REVELATIONS RITUAL

"Before the curtain rises, everyone in 'I Been 'Buked' takes hands. We come together, heads bowed, and focus. It really is beautiful. Right when the curtain goes up we release hands and heads go heavenward."

—MATTHEW RUSHING

Jacqueline Green as the umbrella woman



Matthew Rushing in "I Wanna Be Ready"

DANCERS' FAVORITE SECTIONS

YANNICK LEBRUN: "I Wanna Be Ready"

"You are preparing to die, and you have to be true to what the emotion is. It puts me at peace when I am onstage."

GLENN ALLEN SIMS: "I Been 'Buked"

"Feet planted in semi second position, golden light shining down on you; it is totally overwhelming. I get goosebumps just thinking about the vulnerability."

JACQUELINE GREEN: Umbrella Woman

"When she comes out, it is the first glimpse of joy. You have to embody it, see it in your run."