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'Shelter' a reminder homelessness still pervasive

Alvin Ailey troupe
revives classic work
during run at the Fox.

By **Cynthia Bond Perry**
For the AJC

The sidewalks around the former Peachtree-Pine homeless shelter are now empty, but a few blocks up Peachtree Street, near the Fox Theatre, a woman is sometimes seen huddled in dirty blankets, sleeping on the sidewalk or staring into space. She's a reminder that "Shelter," choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's 1988 work on homelessness, remains relevant.

The sight of people living on the streets troubled Zollar 38 years ago, when she first moved to New York City. She grew used to seeing them over time but felt troubled when she stopped noticing them. She caught herself, realizing she'd almost lost a bit of her humanity.

Zollar decided to create a piece that would bring attention to the issue.

The resulting work, "Shelter," is one of three new productions featured in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's annual performance run, Feb. 14-18, at the Fox Theatre.

'Shelter' continued on E9



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater dancers, including Jacqueline Green (top center), perform "Shelter." CONTRIBUTED BY PAUL KOLNIK

'Shelter'

continued from E1

"Shelter" debuted in Ailey repertory 25 years ago and is returning to the Ailey stage as part of a lineup of 13 works, ranging from a Valentine's Day evening of love duets to a concert tribute to Martin Luther King Jr., featuring Zollar's work alongside Hope Boykin's "r-Evolution, Dream."

Zollar's New York-based company, Urban Bush Women, has dealt with African-American experiences and issues through a unique artistic vision and style that's passionate, visceral and emotionally honest – rooted in African cultural traditions and strikingly contemporary, often giving voice to the unheard. With "Shelter," Zollar addresses the physical and emotional deprivation of homeless people – more broadly, the effects of displacement and the resilience people must have in order to survive.

The work also looks at that point where people lose their humanity.

"When we turn into people who can ignore intractable issues and just say, 'That's the way it is. Only the strong survive,'" Zollar said, "there is a spiritual loss to self, to community, to our nation."

Veta Goler, Spelman College dance professor and arts and humanities division chair, has written about Zollar since the early 1990s. She said Zollar's works often have a spiritual dimension – a sense of ebb and flow, similar to some African-American worship services. Consistent with the culture, Zollar knows how to transform human suffering into something beautiful through creative expression, Goler said.

"The fact that we can be inspired to see something greater than our present conditions, it becomes transformative and transcendent," Zollar said.

Set to a driving score featuring drumming by Junior



Choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar

DANCE PREVIEW

Alvin Alley American Dance Theater. Feb. 14-18. Programs vary. \$25-\$89 plus fees. Fox Theatre, 660 Peachtree St. N.E., Atlanta. foxtheatre.org. For more info on programming, workshops, special offers and discounts, visit alvinalley.org/engagement/atlanta.

"Gabu" Wedderburn and poetry by Hattie Gossett and Laurie Carlos, "Shelter" is performed by six women in simple street clothes, with minimal makeup and unbound hair.

The performers begin in a pile on the floor. They move from one side of the stage to the other, as if searching for home, comfort or safety. They fall into one another's arms, and move in and out of different groups. They whirl through space, fall to the floor, rise and leap into the air, building an intensity of emotion and exertion, until they come together in unison, pointing toward the audience, indicating, "It

could be you."

Revised text in this iteration recalls recent hurricanes and the threat of climate change to our planet – emphasizing our responsibility to protect the home we all share.

To help inspire audiences to get in touch with their humanity, Zollar asked the 12 dancers (two casts of six each) to think about how they interact – or don't interact – with homeless people on the street. Do they avoid eye contact? Walk by as if they were invisible?

The exercise prompted dancer Jacqueline Green to think about the causes of homelessness. Each one has a story of how they got there, she realized, and it could happen to anyone.

Green created a character who "has her guard up." Her movements often come from the chest. She kicks her legs high and fists punch the air, suggesting she's a fighter.

Now when Green encounters a homeless person on the street, she offers them some food from her bag. If she has none, she tells them so, and they usually thank her, grateful to have been acknowledged.