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Homage to Ailey as His Company Turns 60

By: Gia Kourlas

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'Lazarus' explores the life of the choreographer and activist.

By GIA KOURLAS

As a master choreographer, Rennie Harris knows a thing or two about himself. He doesn't gravitate toward making works about a particular topic. And he doesn't plan his dances in advance.

"The movement tells you what the piece is going to be," said Mr. Harris, a Philadelphia native who has deftly brought hip-hop and street dance to the concert stage. "You close your eyes and see if you feel something. Maybe it's music — or maybe you've read something and a story starts to unfold in your head. That's what I often look for: That story. You create the movement and all of a sudden as they're doing it, you see the next movement."

But Mr. Harris, 54, needed to change his game when Robert Battle, the artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, asked him to create a two-act work — the company's first ever — commemorating its 60th anniversary. "I was like, who can handle that?" Mr. Battle said. "Or who would I want to see handle it?"

Mr. Harris, who was recently named the Ailey organization's first artist in residence — it entails mentoring, teaching and lecturing — got to work. "After I talked to Robert," he said with a laugh, "I thought it would behoove me to write ideas down. I've never done that before."

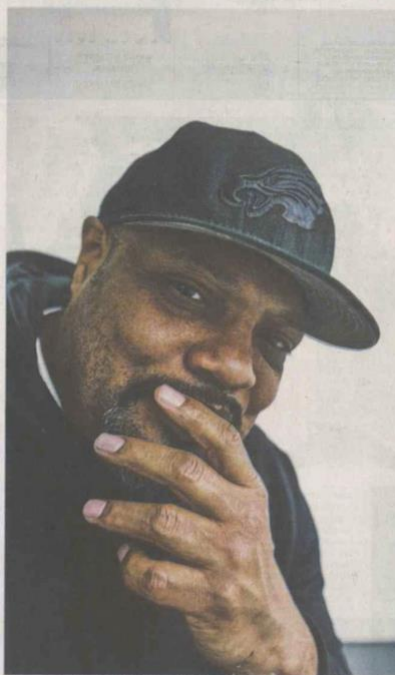
The resulting dance, "Lazarus," is a poetic homage to Alvin Ailey, a man Mr. Harris never met but who, he said, felt like a guide during the process. Now that he has some distance, he said he sees "Lazarus" as the final piece of a trilogy that began with "Home" (2011), a work for Ailey exploring club culture in the time of AIDS, and continued with "Exodus" (2015), which alluded to police brutality and activism.

"Lazarus" is about resurrection and, for Mr. Harris, that circles back to Ailey: With each dancing generation, with every performance of his 1960 masterpiece "Revelations," Ailey is reborn. "He's still affecting folk: black, brown, white, indifferent, whatever," Mr. Harris said. "He's still affecting the world on a massive scale."

In "Lazarus," which explores the civil rights movement as well as Ailey's life, Mr. Harris questions how much has changed — and has not — since Ailey formed his company in 1958. The score, by Mr. Harris's longtime collaborator Darrin Ross, features the ominous sounds of barking dogs and spraying water, ostensibly from a fire hose. (Both were used against protesters in peaceful demonstrations.) Mixed in are songs, including Michael Kiwanuka's "Black Man in a White World," released in 2016 and a reminder of Mr. Harris's point that the struggle continues.

Spoken word plays a part, too. One moment was inspired by Kendrick Lamar's song "Mortal Man," for which he created a dialogue with Tupac Shakur using audio from an interview. Mr. Harris has done the same to recreate a conversation with Ailey.

But while there is a main figure (Daniel Harder in the opening cast), he is more the spirit of Ailey than a physical rendering of him. And though "Lazarus" is a celebration of Ailey's life, it isn't a joyful, pure dance ex-



perience. (Though there is plenty of dancing in it.)

"In my head I got stuck with the 60th anniversary," Mr. Harris said. "We need to be ding-dong, yay! And I saw the poster: There are two dancers dancing, and it has confetti on either side, and I'm like, this is really happy. I don't know if this piece is going to be that happy."

Yet he didn't change course. "I kept moving with the idea that I'm just going to do what I do," he said. "Ninety-five percent of the work I do is dark."

"Lazarus" runs an hour with an intermission between the acts. To create the movement material — generally, Mr. Harris teaches long phrases and then shapes and assembles the material into choreography — he worked with a skeleton crew of dancers. To put things into perspective, when he

created "Exodus," which lasted 20 minutes, he had four weeks. "This time, I had five weeks," he said. "For an hour, right? I was stressed. I'm not great at math, but I kind of knew this was crazy."

The skeleton crew was made up of dancers he had worked with previously, including some from his company, Rennie Harris Puremovement. Mr. Harris would create movement with them for the first chunk of the day and then rehearse with Ailey dancers later. "It alleviated so much stress," he said. "I was able to move faster and get the choreography done."

The movement is based on Mr. Harris's blend of rhythm house, specifically GQ, which dates to the 1960s and derives from the cha-cha with an emphasis on fast footwork and a relaxed upper body. The Ailey dancer Jacquelin Harris said that Mr. Har-



Top and above, members of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater rehearsing "Lazarus" by Rennie Harris, left; it's a poetic evocation of Ailey's life and times. Daniel Harder, top center, is the main figure.

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ris — no relation — described it as if "there's change in your pockets, and you've got to move your hips like you're trying to make the change jiggle."

GQ practitioners wore suits, hence the name. "In Philadelphia, it became a style where each generation changed it a little bit," Mr. Harris said. "It was done with the black social clubs of the '60s and then that evolved into everybody doing it — it was the dance style that's indigenous to Philly as a street dance. When people were breaking here in New York, this is what we were doing on the streets."

To master the movement, Ms. Harris said that you need a good sense of rhythm and a good sense of self. "There's like this cool factor about it that Nina — that is, Nina Flagg, a former Puremovement dancer who is the rehearsal director for "Lazarus" — "always talks about. She's like, 'Keep the cool, keep the culture and keep the choreography.' I think a lot of that has to do with confidence."

But "Lazarus" means something else for the Ailey dancers: "We do a lot of works from the past because it's a huge part of the culture here," Ms. Harris continued. "We bring them back trying to relate that time to where we are here and now, and it's nice to have a piece that does it for us — where we see the relationship between then and now versus trying to bring something from the past into the present."

It took Mr. Harris some time to figure out how to do that. In his research, which included listening to many interviews, Mr. Harris grasped that Ailey, who died in 1989, was an artist who felt that his work was for everyone. For much of the choreographic process, he was holding onto the idea of having Mr. Harder portray Ailey.

"It was the last week that everything changed for me," he said. "I felt like Mr. Ailey was like, 'Look. You know this is wrong. Don't do that.'"

He laughed. "I was being stubborn, like I'm going to make this work," Mr. Harris continued. "At the very end, we realize that Daniel has already transitioned" — meaning he is in the spirit world — and he's been guiding and watching the whole time throughout the piece. He wasn't Mr. Ailey. He is a manifestation of all of us."