

## DANCE

# Berkeley is a home on the road for Ailey

By Steven Winn

Seen once, the opening moments of Alvin Ailey's "Revelations" are forever imprinted on a viewer's inner eye. Arrayed in tight formation, the dancers bend one way and then the other, arms outstretched in solemn body harmony with the spiritual "I Been 'Buked." Then, like a flock of birds poised to take flight, they simultaneously knee-bend toward the floor and wing-span their arched arms in one of the signature images of American dance. It never fails to send a collective shiver out across the footlights.

Formed 60 years ago, in 1958, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, writes Julia L. Foulkes in "Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism From Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey," "fused in movement and theme the national political focus of the 1930s with the racial heritage of America — thus embracing and altering American modern dance." The influence and importance of the company, to both the dance world and the culture at large, are wide and multifaceted.

Margaret Jenkins, founder and artistic director of the Margaret Jenkins Dance Company, first saw the Ailey company in New York in 1964. "You certainly felt that you were witnessing the brave commitment of gathering dancers primarily of African American heritage," she said recently. "In those days that was a singular phenomenon."

**Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater:** Tuesday-next Sunday, April 10-15. Zellerbach Hall, UC Berkeley. \$36-\$135. (510) 642-9988. [www.calperformances.org](http://www.calperformances.org).

**Program A:** April 10 and 14. "Stack-Up," "Members Don't Get Weary," "Revelations."

**Program B:** April 11, 12 and 15. "Mass," "Ella," "Shelter," "The Hunt," "Revelations."

**Program C:** April 13 and 14. "The Golden Section," "Victoria," "Ella," "Revelations."

As a young dancer herself, Jenkins was both conscious of witnessing a "milestone" and "captivated by the energy and force and commitment" of the performances.

"Their unique spirit and humanity have made dance more accessible to broader audiences for decades," noted Helgi Tomasson, artistic director of San Francisco Ballet.

"Their work is built on a canon of dignity," said Robert Moses, founder and artistic director of Roberts Moses' Kin. "Shelter," an Ailey company work about homelessness he first saw 25 years ago, is as "relevant as ever," said Moses, "maybe more so." While many see the Ailey legacy "specifically attached to a kind of spiritual and religious exaltation," Moses reframes it this way: "It's about the human spirit being exalted and maintaining the struggle. It's rooted in the heart and soul."

"Revelations" and "Shelter"



Paul Kolnik

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has been performing annually in Berkeley for 50 years.

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are both on the Ailey Dance Theater's forthcoming three-program run at Zellerbach Hall. Presented by Cal Performances, the engagement Tuesday-next Sunday, April 10-15, marks the 50th anniversary of the company's first visit to Berkeley. Over the years here, in annual appearances, the troupe has performed 169 works by 72 choreographers.

"They are a fundamental anchor to our season and have been for 50 years," said Cal Performances director Matias Tarnopolsky. By addressing "issues of representation and equality," he added, "they remain in the vanguard. The quality of the dancers has always been superb."

This year's Zellerbach run includes three West Coast premieres, as well as works from other eras. "Revelations" closes each program.

Robert Battle, only the company's third artistic director in six decades — following Ailey himself (1958-89) and Judith Jamison (1989-2011) — said the regular Berkeley visits "create a sense of ongoing community that dovetails with what we do."

The bonds, including some painful ones, run deep. In 2014, technical director E.J. Corrigan and Calvin Hunt, senior director of performance and production, died within a week of each other during the troupe's California tour. Corri-

gan had started the tradition of a Berkeley barbecue to blend the dancers, company members and local crew. "Even in sadness," said Battle, "we have found a real sense of family here."

Battle offered capsule previews of the three works new to the West Coast this year. On Program A, it's company member Jamar Roberts' "Members Don't Get Weary," set to music by John Coltrane. Calling the piece "abstract and introspective," Battle noted the complexity and sophistication of Coltrane's rhythms. "It's very hard music to choreograph. I think Jamar makes the music visible while actually saying something about the blues."

Battle's own "Mass" is the West Coast premiere on Program B. Seeing a friend sing in the Verdi "Requiem" choir was the inspiration. Battle was intrigued by the physical fixity

*Ailey continues on Q43*

Ailey from page 23

of the singers — "In a sense they're trapped in those rows" — and "the way the voices travel through the hall and through our bodies." Two other works by the artistic director, "Ella" and "The Hunt," are also on that Battle-dominated bill.

Gustavo Ramirez Sansano's "Victoria," with music by Michael Gordon, fills the premiere slot on Program C. Deemed a "very different kind of work for us," Battle likened it to "a rewriting of Beethoven's Fifth." For critics who have taken issue with the readily watchable, perhaps overly accessible quality of the Ailey company choreography at times, "Victoria" may offer a response. "It keeps you on edge," said Battle. "It's not comforting."

Ailey, who grew up in hardscrabble Texas in the 1930s and went on to create one of the most beloved dance companies of the 20th and now 21st centuries, has been dead for almost 30 years. But his animating spirit, truly populist in the unpolluted sense of the word, is bodied forth every time and everywhere the company performs.

"Dance is for everybody," he famously said. "I believe that dance came from the people and it should always be delivered back to the people." Once again, 50 years on, another delivery is due in Berkeley.

Steven Winn is *The San Francisco Chronicle's* former arts and culture critic.