

I Became an Alvin Ailey Dancer. Well, Kind Of

By: Tamara Best

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Tamara Best has long loved Alvin Ailey’s dance company—and so she leapt at the opportunity to learn one of its seminal pieces on a sunny evening at New York’s Lincoln Center.

I took a breath attempting to wash the memories of the day away and channel my inner Misty Copeland. I’ve never formally danced but have always relished the beauty and precision of ballet. To my credit, my delicate footwork in barre class at my local gym has earned the praise of my instructor—so that counts for something right?



Still, this wasn’t my evening workout class. My classroom was outdoors—the plaza at Lincoln Center to be exact—on a perfect summer night alongside members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and fellow dance enthusiasts.



I looked around to see attendees of all ages and backgrounds gathered in attendance—a passerby from Israel who reluctantly hopped on stage and nailed the choreography, former dancers, young children and everyday New Yorkers like yours truly.

With their current New York season underway through Sunday, the company brought Ailey off the stage with a public workshop teaching portions of its seminal work, “Revelations” on Thursday night.



Choreographed by Alvin Ailey (who died in 1989), the work which is rooted in gospel and blues has become synonymous with the company. For the past few years visiting Ailey, under the artistic direction of Robert Battle, has become a holiday season tradition for me.

Every time the curtain rises for “Revelations” I fall in love anew. “I Wanna Be Ready,” remains by favorite—moving my spirit and eyes to tears akin to Sunday morning church service, as I watch a soloist in what I’ve always viewed as the journey of faith over one’s lifetime.

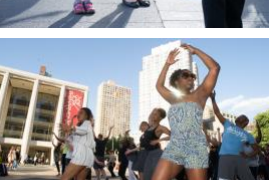


But how does one prepare to learn “Revelations?” I wasn’t sure but Renee Robinson, who danced with Ailey for more than 30 years, gave me a simple yet profound advice. “All you need is to show up with joy,” she told me. And so I did with an intense focus on paying attention to the footwork, story, and emotions.

As we learned “I Been Buked,” “Wade in the Water,” and “Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham” my moves felt a bit mechanical. I looked around to see some of my fellow Ailey newbies a bit tentative but excited more than anything which translated into great dancing by the time we took our final bow.



I slowly loosened up as we went over each piece of choreography. But by the end, my body instinctively moved to the music in a way I didn’t quite expect—a natural shoulder roll as I waded in the imaginary baptismal waters, and loose swaying hips with a perfectly timed clap in rocka my soul. I was so in tune by the end that I hadn’t realized a substantial crowd, many dressed for the company’s gala, had formed on the plaza to watch us and joined in for the final time we danced “Rocka My Soul.”



Mr. Battle, I need a tad more practice, but if you need an extra for rehearsals, I’m available.

