Alvin Ailey makes you believe all over again

KAUFMAN PROLOGUE

Resurrection. Ailey died in 1989, which could have meant the end of the dance company he founded 30 years before. In contemporary dance, the death of a company founder is usually less important than the survival, but also to flourish — and reach this point at the pinnacle of American modern dance, 30 years after Ailey’s death — is the company’s continual act of breathing new life into Ailey’s vision.

In tracing how Ailey came to his vision of a dance company focused on stories of the African American experience, “Lazarus” thrusts the audience into painful territory. The work is in two parts. The first paints a visceral tableau of the black experience in the South (Ailey grew up in rural Texas in the 1930s) during and after the Great Depression. The theater echoes with amplified mourns and anxious heartbeats as discrete pools of light illuminate grotesqueries from the shadows — images of lynching, of people scraping on all fours, of agitated dancers dragging partners across the stage who appear to be lifeless.

We hear occasional recordings of Ailey’s distinctive, deep voice. “I suffered from survivor’s guilt,” he says at one point, words that add another searing, emotional layer to a deeply affecting portrait of violated bodies. What gives “Lazarus” even more horsepower are the quick, pungent spots where the hardcore Ailey fan will recognize movements from Ailey’s most famous work and the company’s signature dance, “Revelations.” Male dancers sprouting, looking nervously behind them, arms reaching up, with palms catching the light; the curve of bent backs and contracted torsos — these call to mind iconic moments from “Revelations,” but Harris tucks them in subtly, like Easter eggs for the connoisseur that fit in seamlessly with the overall choreography.

The muscular punch and quick footwork of hip-hop gives “Lazarus” a lift, particularly in its celebratory, upbeat second half. But Harris also shows a tenderly expressive lyrical side. In one of the most beautiful images, dancers lie in a cluster on their backs with arms raised skyward, and these gentle swaying limbs resemble a field of branches, or rows of cotton. Women gather up their aprons and bend over them like farmworkers, and the dancers shadowy hand ballet turns field labor into stylized poetry, an abstraction of bending, sweeping and grasping.

Watching “Revelations,” which was performed after “Lazarus,” I felt I was seeing the familiar gospel-themed work with fresh eyes. Unfortunately, I also noted a softening of the customarily crisp upper-body lines in the opening and other parts and somewhat less charisma and expressive urgency in the “Wade in the Water” section. Keeping the electricity buzzing in this decades-old staple can’t be easy, one hopes the energy returns in force.

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Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs three programs in rotation at the Kennedy Center Opera House through Feb. 10. The Feb. 8 evening program, which includes “Lazarus,” features a post-performance discussion with choreographer Rennie Harris. $59-$219. 202-467-4600. kennedycenter.org.