

'Lazarus' delineates the Ailey miracle

By: Sarah L. Kaufman

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DANCE REVIEW

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Sometimes, the less said, the better. Even when kicking off a triumphant occasion, such as the 60th anniversary of a modern-dance company, which is, by the way, a monumental mile-marker in the economically stressed field of dance.

On Tuesday night at the Kennedy Center, Alvin Ailey Artistic Director Robert Battle kept his opening remarks blissfully simple. At the D.C. premiere of a work he'd commissioned to celebrate six decades as a primarily African American dance company, Battle spoke of the late company founder Ailey as "a black man who had a vision 60 years ago, and here we are, living in his wake."

And with that, he left any further commentary to the art.

A brilliant move. The new work, "Lazarus," by Philadelphia-based hip-hop choreographer Rennie Harris, had plenty to say about being a black man, about being a black man 60 years ago and about Ailey's vision and what he'd left behind. As obvious from the title, "Lazarus" deals with

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Alvin Ailey makes you believe all over again

KAUFMAN FROM C1

resurrection. Ailey died in 1989, which could have meant the end of the dance company he'd founded 30 years before. In contemporary dance, the death of a company founder is an often insurmountable blow, as funders lose interest, audiences drift away and fiscal realities tear at whatever foundation is left. The fact that Ailey's company stuck together and found a way not only to survive, but also to flourish — and reach this point at the pinnacle of

American modern dance, 30 years after Ailey's death — is the resurrection Harris addresses in his piece. It's 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 moans and anxious heartbeats as discrete pools of light illuminate grotesqueries from the shadows — images of lynchings, of people scrabbling 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,"



PAUL KOLNIK

"Lazarus," the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater celebration of its history and namesake founder, is playing at the Kennedy Center.

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 sprinting, 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 and lyrical side. In one of the most beautiful images, dancers lie in a cluster on their backs with arms raised skyward, and these gently 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. kennedy-center.org.