

Philly hip-hop legend Rennie Harris returns this weekend with America's hottest ballet

By: Lauren McCutcheon

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Choreographer Rennie Harris, international pioneer of street dance theater, isn't big on accepting praise. He might have to learn.

Harris' latest work, *Lazarus*, his fourth and most recent commission for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, has elicited unprecedented adulation from eminent dance critics.

The piece commemorates the Alvin Ailey troupe's 60 years. It makes its Philadelphia debut Friday night and Saturday afternoon at the Academy of Music, along with Ailey's iconic *Revelations*. (The Ailey troupe dances a third Kimmel performance Saturday night, but *Lazarus* is not on that night's program.)

Later this spring, Harris will premiere another new work – this time with Philadanco at the Kimmel Center. And in June he'll present his own dance company, Rennie Harris Puremovement, in the family-friendly *Funkedified* at the Merriam Theater.

But it's *Lazarus* that's the talk of the dance world at this moment.

In one hour and in two acts, *Lazarus* portrays the time and social climate when dance pioneer Alvin Ailey lived. It completes what Harris sees as his Ailey trilogy, beginning with *Home* (2011) and then *Exodus* (2015).

For the 55-year-old, North Philly-born-and-bred founder of Puremovement, the work is in many ways the culmination of his career in dance. In other ways, it's just the beginning.

Harris spoke with the Inquirer from Los Angeles, where he was recuperating from hip replacement surgery. He's currently teaching at the University of Texas at Austin.

"Lazarus" is getting amazing reviews. Congratulations.

I kind of don't pay it too much attention. I kind of keep it moving, not try to get overwhelmed by it all.

If you live that much in the present, you're the Nick Foles of street dance.

That, I appreciate.

"Lazarus" is your biggest work for Ailey. How did you approach it?

The company wanted something around Mr. Ailey. But for me, this was really more about: I don't want to delve directly into his particular life — all the books I've read, all the videos I've watched. ... It's not to say the life wasn't interesting, I just thought I should really get into this idea about what was happening around him, politically, economically, and socially.

When I'm teaching my students, in technique class or a [dance] history class, I tell them, if you want to know why people move the way they move physically — the posture, the way a person walks — you need to know what's happening politically, economically, and socially. Those things affect the human body and how we navigate through space.

I asked: What was happening before [Ailey] that made him want to do *Revelations*? What was happening while he was on his path of creating all those things?

Your process was different this time. How?

I hired some New York street dancers and paid them for two or three hours a day. I would work on my ideas with them, and in that third hour, I'd get all those ideas together. I'd then start rehearsal with Alvin Ailey from about 3 to 6 [p.m.]. That's when I'd transfer all that movement.

To me, working with a skeleton crew was the biggest find ever. I came late to the party in this way, because every choreographer was already working with students to create their work for professional companies.

I was so excited about the fact. I thought I was so clever. It saved me because I was able to do the whole thing in five weeks.

Five weeks seems like a tight turnaround.

With my company [Puremovement], I work on a work for years, and I'm still working on it. We premiered one work last year, and now, I'm like, "OK: I'm gonna go back and redo it."



It's a hazard of the job. Mostly, my goal is to get it to a place where it can be mounted. That's when I actually start choreographing. Then I can see it all, I can see it in its glory.

I'm better when I have enough time to really look at it after it premieres, so I can see I missed this, or I should have done that.

Will you see "Lazarus" on tour?

This is the first time I wanted to go see it, to help to make sure it stays in the right track. I've never done that before. I'm basically spending my own dime to go to the big cities: D.C., L.A., and Miami. And Philly.

Was becoming a choreographer a childhood dream?

My generation, from the beginning of it, we were able to choreograph because we were charged with making up our own movement half the time. We have our own understanding of how to choreograph. But I never saw myself as a choreographer. I saw myself as a dancer.

I didn't realize I was a choreographer until I was about 36 or 37. ... It wasn't until I got this really bad review in Charleston, S.C., at Spoleto. It said, "Choreographer Harris Brings Angst Dance to Spoleto Festival."

I said aloud to myself: "I'm a choreographer?"

"Angst dance"?

If you go through all my work, there's nothing that's that happy. Starting out, we had only two dance pieces, "P-Funk" and "Students of the Asphalt Jungle." The rest was mostly performance art about race and molestation and the church.

People who knew, knew these were serious themes and narratives. Others just didn't want hip-hop because they didn't want violence. They wanted "America's Best Dance Crew."

People were picketing my shows, boycotting my shows. But if rap is deep to you, my work is in that vein.

What do you wish outsiders would recognize about your work?

People are starting to say I'm modern, I'm contemporary. I don't know any modern. I don't know any ballet, not to be able to teach it, or even African.

Critics want to ask me if Ailey or modern dance had any influence on me. As if that would define me or make sense for me. People don't want to accept it for what it really is, which is just street dance, happening right in front of you.

How do you describe your style of street dance?

To most people, there's only one street dance style, and that's hip-hop. Hip-hop is a party, a social dance. But what they're seeing is house.

They're seeing lofting. They're seeing breaking. They're seeing footwork. They're seeing GQ, which is a Philadelphia street dance — nowhere else in the world is GQ done. But they just see the whole thing as hip-hop.

The foundation of my work is house, specifically my style of house, which is influenced by GQ. All of street dance is based on pedestrian movement in day-to-day life. It's the glue between the movement and narrative that I create.

DANCE

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Performances 7:30 p.m. Friday and 2 & 7:30 p.m. Saturday. (*Lazarus* will be danced on Friday night and at the Saturday matinee, but not Saturday night.) Academy of Music, 240 S. Broad St., \$25-\$94, 215-893-1999, kimmelcenter.org