

## Rennie Harris pays homage to Alvin Ailey in a masterpiece of street dance

By: Ellen Dunkel

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Philadelphia choreographer Rennie Harris was given an enormous assignment when he was asked to make a piece honoring Alvin Ailey (the man) for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's 60th anniversary.

But what Harris made was a masterpiece. *Lazarus* had its Philadelphia premiere Thursday night at the Academy of Music.

Harris' medium is street dance, but it is clearly sophisticated, refined concert dance -- something worth keeping in mind if you are taking children who might expect to see big tricks.

The first of two acts is dark in both lighting and themes. It opens with one man holding up another, like the paintings of Jesus' Descent From the Cross. But in this case, the Jesus figure is Lazarus, or more likely Ailey, who died in 1989 of what was later revealed to be AIDS.

This mirrors the final moments of *Exodus*, Harris' previous work for Ailey, where he is artist-in-residence. (That piece came to Philadelphia in 2017 and addressed the sometimes contentious relationship between police and citizens.)

The movement in the first act of *Lazarus* is primarily slow pedestrian movements. It is set to a score produced by Darrin Ross that includes songs by the likes of Nina Simone and Odetta, as well as a good amount of spoken text. We also hear heartbeats, rattling coughs, dogs barking, and gun shots. Group scenes portray struggles and deaths. It is unclear whether this is Ailey's attempts to make it in the world or time closer to his death.



Soon we also see Lazarus/Ailey rise above, nearly walking on water, in a beautiful scene with dancers lying on the ground and moving their arms in delicate waving movements.

Harris uses movement that is primarily footwork -- a Philadelphia hip-hop style called CQ -- in much of the first act. It is especially impressive in a section that looks like fast, precise Irish step dancing set to Michael Kiwanuka's "Black Man in a White World."

The second act is more upbeat, celebrating Ailey's choreography and time with the company, and it is delightful. Here the movement is faster, the dancers take flying leaps, and audiences are encouraged to clap along. The dancing and the party are so much fun that it is startling when the piece ends on an intentionally abrupt somber note.

*Lazarus*, and especially that second act, is something of Harris' version of *Revelations*, Ailey's iconic work that is included in most of the company's performances.



*Revelations*, choreographed in 1960, wraps up the program at the Academy of Music, with its gorgeous modern dance set to gospel music. It's like hearing your favorite song in a concert, a joy however often you see it.

Now the connection to *Lazarus* is clear, down to the "Wade in the Water" scene, which like Harris' choreography, has dancers walking on water, this time along strips of blue fabric.

*Revelations* ends with the rollicking "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham," which is also a good reflection on the fate of Lazarus/Ailey.

If you miss *Lazarus*, there are two more chances this spring to see Harris' choreography, in a piece for Philadanco in April and with his own company, Puremovement, in June.

*Lazarus*. 2 p.m. Saturday. (A different program will be performed 7:30 p.m. Saturday.) Academy of Music, 240 S. Broad St., \$25-\$94. 215-893-1999, [kimmelcenter.org](http://kimmelcenter.org)

