

## Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater: *Lazarus/Revelations* – review

By: Sarah Crompton

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A hip-hop tribute to Alvin Ailey dazzles with its thrilling interpretation of African American lives

The shadow of Alvin Ailey has always stood over the company he founded in 1958, as an inspiration and a guide. It does so literally here, in the first of three programmes the New York-based troupe is bringing to Sadler's Wells.

At the close of *Lazarus*, by the hip-hop choreographer Rennie (Lorenzo) Harris, after the wild applause the mood becomes more thoughtful, the lighting darkens and a man speaks on the soundtrack about the need for African Americans to respect themselves and thus heal racial division. A shadow looms, like a silent reminder of all that has been achieved and all that still needs achieving.

It could not be a better tribute to Ailey, whose aim in creating America's first black (and then multiracial) dance company was to create art that expressed cultural identity in ways both profound and uplifting. Harris has taken this credo and woven a two-act work of considerable complexity, inspired by Ailey's legacy.

Set to a score by Darrin Ross that mixes snatches of sound with spoken words and songs by Nina Simone and Michael Kiwanuka among others, it treats events and images in the most impressionistic and expressionistic of ways. It begins in thick shadow, punctuated by quick, spotlit scenes where men stalk the stage in long-legged strides and women swing their easy arms. Shockingly, suddenly, we see a group standing, their necks to one side, as if hanging. "I suffer from survivor skill," says a voice, and a young man emerges, separating from his weeping mother, filling the stage with a solo of soundless, crouching jumps and whirring one-armed turns.



This figure stays with us through moments that summon the shades of a poor Texas childhood, the rapture of a Baptist church (arms raised in a call to God), the sorrow of mourning (heads bowed, coffin raised), the traditional dances of field workers (running with clapping hands and quick, kicking feet) and the power and anger of the civil rights movement (an arm raised in a Black Panther salute). There's a marvellous long section to Kiwanuka's *Black Man in a White World*, where the women leap across the stage like Olive Oyl, legs and arms outstretched and the men jig and jump in powerful formation.

It looks glorious, helped by Mark Eric's costume designs and James Clotfelter's lighting. The dancing is wonderful – assured, skilful, incredibly fast; the second act is a showcase of that talent. *Lazarus* appears to have risen, and his ascent is a cause for celebratory hip-hop. Not everything is as clear as this summary makes it seem, but there is no doubt of the work's ambition; I rather loved it.



The evening concludes, as does every performance, with Ailey's *Revelations*, from 1960, set to spirituals and gospel, a triumphant hymn to the human spirit, moving from a sense of sorrow to joy-filled life. It's perhaps now over-familiar, but remains a fine piece, a tribute to the man who made it and to the dancers who perform it with such conviction. Ailey's shadow looms large.

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