

The Telegraph

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Programme A, Sadler's Wells, review: a stirring and skin-pricklingly exciting evening

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Alvin Ailey was born in rural Texas in 1931. Like so many other African Americans then and since, he experienced frightful racism, but astonishing talent and tenacity allowed him to claw his way up to become one of America's best-loved dancer-choreographers.

He founded his own, contemporary troupe – Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater – in 1958 as a vehicle and haven for black Americans who wanted to dance for a living. And, although Ailey himself died in 1989, his company lives on loud and proud, under the sterling directorship of Robert Battle.

After a three-year absence, it is now, happy to say, back at Sadler's Wells for 10 days with three generous evenings of work, and the centrepiece of Programme A is the British premiere of the company's first ever two-act work: *Lazarus*. Created last year by hip-hop choreographer Rennie Harris, this work – by turns bleak and (in two senses) upbeat – was inspired by the life, times and "blood memories" of Ailey. But it is in fact anything but a straightforward narrative. In fact, ricocheting as it does between eras and images, it yields its many secrets with great reluctance.

Most of it plays out in a beautiful, stark penumbra, with the light often coming from the side like a wan sun barely managing to pierce the early-morning mist. Taken as a whole, these passages read like an elaborately constructed tapestry on a theme of African American history, with the soundtrack feverishly intertwining music by various artists of African-Caribbean descent with heartbeats, heavy-breathing, gunshots and a (probably unnecessary) voice-over by Harris.



The opening image could be a chain gang trudging back to prison, but you're not quite sure; a little later, the people bearing fallen comrades across the stage could be slaves, or else the victims of police brutality – similarly, it's hard to tell for certain.

Does the central *Lazarus* figure (the fantastic Daniel Harder) "merely" represent Ailey? And exactly what – in the piece's standout vignettes – is the sea of rippling arms, reaching up from the floor like inquisitive serpents? These could be anything from a field of some forcibly picked crop to the souls of the dead straining towards the light. Again, the mystery is part of the fascination.

Offsetting these stirring episodes are modern-dress ensembles – most memorably to a technofied version of Nina Simone's *Feelin' Good* – in which the dancers let rip with the dance style from Harris's home town of Philadelphia that's known as GQ. This has all the high-energy buoyancy of hip-hop "locking", except that – much as with tap – the upper-body lollops easygoingly while the feet do all the furious work.

Needless to say, the impossibly ripped, glamorous and musical AAADT dancers make it look skin-pricklingly exciting, even if, just when you think the piece is going to end on a "look how far we've come" high note, sombreness suddenly creeps in. There is, of course, still a long way to go.

Closing all three bills (as always) is Ailey's 1960 signature piece *Revelations*, which may well be the most-seen contemporary dance work of all time. After so long and so much exposure, it hardly qualifies as revelatory. But as a 35-minute catalogue raisonné of the gospel and blues influences that Ailey carried with him from the Lone Star state, and an intoxicating exultation of the liberation that is moving to music, it still takes some beating.



Until Sept 14. Tickets: 0844 871 2118; [tickets.telegraph.co.uk](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/tickets)