

Alvin Ailey 'Revelations' Comes to Fox

By: Felicia Feaster
February 20, 2020

DANCE 'REVELATIONS'



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will perform a series of shows at the Fox Theatre in February. CONTRIBUTED

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Principal dancer Nasha Thomas brings the residency program back to Atlanta schools.

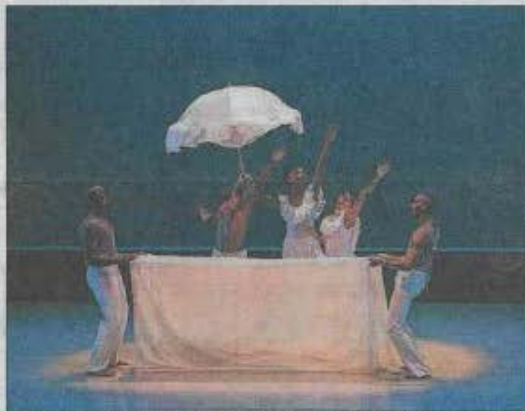
By Felicia Feaster
For the AJC

For 21 years former Alvin Ailey principal dancer Nasha Thomas has traveled to Atlanta with a singular mission.

In an age when many public schools have gutted or cut back on their arts programs, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Thomas — in a long and important collaboration with the city — have shown the value of art in individual lives. The founder of the renowned New York City-based Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ailey, who died in 1989, was an advocate for the importance of arts education and believed that bringing the arts to underprivileged communities and to public schools was vital.

The "Revelations" Residency Program helmed by Thomas, and which recently returned to Atlanta, is a manifestation of Ailey's belief in the power of arts education.

Though he created more than



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Alvin Ailey's "Revelations." PAUL KOLNIK

79 dance performances during his lifetime, "Revelations" remains Ailey's masterpiece, considered the best-known modern dance work in the world.

Performed continuously since its debut in 1960, Ailey has described "Revelations" as part of his "blood memory" of growing up as the child of a single-mother in segregated, Depres-

sion-era Texas when the church was a fundamental part of his life. "Revelations" has proven an enduring classic of American dance for telling the story of the black experience through the decades, from slavery to emancipation, all along using music, from gospel to the blues to American spirituals to show the primacy of faith and endurance.

The "Revelations" Residency program returned to Atlanta this year under the direction of Thomas, who is Alvin Ailey's Master Teacher for Arts in Education and Community Programs. The award-winning New Jersey-based dancer and mother of two teenage children now calls Atlanta her "home away from home." In her 30-year history with the city, Thomas has been both a performer and a mentor to area students.

For the 2020 iteration of the "Revelations" Residency from Feb. 10-14, Thomas guided students at Coretta Scott King Young Women's Leadership Academy and M. Agnes Jones Elementary School in a week-long program centered on "Revelations."

Thomas describes the "Revelations" Residency as an important way to encourage self-discipline and creative expression in Atlanta public school students who may not be nurtured at home or who may have difficulty in school.

"Giving an ear to a young person who is shy, unsure, and afraid to speak up is important," she says. "I want the young people that I work with to know that

'Revelations' continued on D4

'Revelations'

continued from D1

their voices, thoughts and feelings are valid and most importantly they are loved," says Thomas of her role as mentor to these students. It's a role that she told *Good Housekeeping* magazine in 2018 she cherishes even more than she did her time as an Alvin Ailey principal dancer from 1986 to 1998 where favorite performances included "Suite Otis" choreographed by George Faison, Alvin Ailey's "Cry" and all of the ballets choreographed by the late Ulysses Dove.

"Many of the youngsters I mentor don't have support from home, so having someone that they look up to who is successful and doing something positive with their life gives them hope."

The "Revelations" Residency is multifaceted and uses that dance as a jumping-off point, to teach students about language arts, social studies, science and the dance itself, including creating their own choreography and learning choreography from "Revelations" as part of the residency.

The program is an in-depth immersion in art at a time when many public school students don't have regular exposure to the arts.

"It is often in these programs that students who are struggling academically excel," observes Thomas of the value she has seen her students glean from the "Revelations" Residency. "The arts require discipline, focus, cooperation and commitment. The 'Revelations' Residency program is wonderful because it gives students a platform to express themselves and explore their creativity. They not only learn about the life of Alvin Ailey and his many contributions, [but] they [also] get to create some dances of their own, write poems, share ideas and work closely with their peers."

Students connect with Ailey, who kept a journal, by writing in their own journals as part of the program.

"I let them read the bios



Dancer Nasha Thomas works with students at Miami's Richmond Heights Middle School.

JUSTIN NAMON/COURTESY OF ARSHT CENTER

EVENT PREVIEW

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater "Revelations"

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out loud in front of each other which they really enjoy. Reading and writing are often things they struggle with and don't like to do. Doing it together in class encourages them and helps them feel less self-conscious," says Thomas. If art is about transformation – of both the artist and the audience – then the students in the "Revelations" Residency program learn to be agents of their own destiny, to see how they can affect change through their words and actions.

"The 'Revelations' curriculum is designed to have the students work in a structured learning environment, and the lessons are comprehensive. From the moment they come in we get them thinking and sharing their thoughts and ideas," notes Thomas.

The culmination of the "Revelations" Residency will be a performance today by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater of "Revelations" for Atlanta public school students at the Fox Theatre.

Part of a 40-year relationship between the Alvin Ailey company and the city of Atlanta, "Revelations" has

become an annual tradition during Black History Month at the Fox Theatre. In fact, Thomas' work with the "Revelations" Residency is just one part of her company's Destination Dance Ailey Atlanta initiative. Destination Dance, says Thomas, "was created in 2017, to deepen connections with Atlanta-based cultural, civic and educational organizations through diverse year-round programming. It was important to us to develop stronger partnerships and continue to work and develop the young people in the city and dance community."

The "Revelations" performance at the Fox will allow Thomas' Atlanta students to experience a full-circle experience, having been able to learn and participate in elements of "Revelations" through the residency and then to engage as observers of dance. "There is definitely a sense of pride because of the residency experience and then seeing 'Revelations' in a theater with lights and costumes performed by the beautiful dancers," says Thomas. "Also, for many of the students, it will be the first time going to the Fox Theatre."

"I think exposure to 'Revelations' teaches students that they can achieve anything with hard work, vision, and perseverance," says Thomas. "Learning choreography from the ballet and then seeing professionals doing what they learned gives them a sense of accomplishment."