Dancers relive landmark moment

PREVIEW

Alley II
Presented by: Alberta Ballet
Where: Friday and Saturday at 7:30 p.m.
Where: Jubilee Auditorium
Tickets: Starting at $29, albertaballet.com

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Great works of dance are not easily preserved for future generations to enjoy. Moving bodies are simply not meant to be fixed to museum walls.

Instead, imagine dance pieces like precious, perishable heirlooms that must be handed down and resurrected by performance.

Take the signature 1960 Alvin Alley work, Revelations, a编 that tells the story of African-American faith, despair and hope, the journey from slavery to freedom. It is interpreted in a suite of dances set to spirituals, gospels and holy blues.

There are dance reviews from the time that shed light on what a landmark moment it was in dance history for the African-American experience. It was performed on a New York City stage in 1960 and it made some incredibly uncomfortable. But dance writers would be the first to admit how inadequate the written word is for capturing down dance, how one critic's perspective is simply one person's subjective opinion and not historical fact.

Archival photographs and film footage exist and do illustrate the way Revelations powerfully moved audiences. But nothing can stand in for seeing it performed live. It is a transcendent experience.

Thankfully, the cultural treasure is well-travelled. Since its premiere, Revelations has been performed around the globe for 23 million people in 71 countries. It may well have been seen by more people than any other ballet created in the 20th century. The masterpiece Revelations makes its way to Edmonton this weekend, with Alvin Alley Dance Theater's young second company, Alley II, dancing. Founded in 1974 as a teaching workshop company, Alley II was intended to nurture the brightest students from his Alvin Alley Dance Theater School and prepare them for the professional field.

"I had the wonderful opportunity of meeting and working with Mr. Alley," Powell says of the dance pioneer, who died in 2009. "My motto is definitely to keep the company's tradition alive but also to bring in works that will enhance the dancers. In this day and age, Alley II has evolved from 1974. It is no longer just considered a workshop repertoire company. It has definitely gained a popularity with its own identity as a company."

"I think Revelations is a piece that everyone can relate to, no matter what age you are, no matter what your economic status is, no matter what your race is. I know you can watch it on YouTube, but you can watch it on YouTube. But there is nothing like seeing it live and seeing these young dancers put themselves through the movement, a piece that was choreographed 53 years ago."

"Now these dancers in 2014 are not going through those same struggles; they aren't experiencing first-hand what Mr. Alley did in the 1960s."
Young dancers smart, attentive, hungry for challenge

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“So I think that is part of their grooming. When we teach them the work, we tell them that part of their responsibility as young artists is to portray those roles.”

In addition to Revelations, Ailey II will perform The External Knot from 2007, Powell’s most autobiographical dance work. It explores a young man’s search for individuality in a series of trios, duets and solos.

“At that point in my life, I wanted to explore a more personal journey of mine. My other works are a bit more abstract. I think this one has a lot more of my journey as a dancer, a choreographer, and my place in this world and this field as an artist. There were times where I felt very comfortable and supported by a lot of people and then there were times when, you know, as a human being, we all go through feeling lonely. I wanted to show that vulnerable side. There is a breakthrough — we may not know exactly what that outcome is, but we know he has made it out there into the world.”

The two other pieces, We, a duet by Alvin Ailey Dance Theater artistic director Robert Battle, and Rusty, a piece for nine dancers by French-born, former Ailey company dancer Benoît-Swan Pouffer, explore various themes on relationships, from issues of trust to working and growing in relationships.

Powell says his Ailey II dancers are young, mostly 19 through 24, but they are smart and intellectual artists, attentive and hungry for a challenge.

The piece We portrays a seasoned couple and that often proves to be tricky for young dancers.

“I bring in dancers that are more seasoned, veteran dancers like Renee Robinson. She was with the Ailey company since 1981, so she’s very mature. I brought her in as she performed the work with Robert Battle. So for her to be hands-on with them, after him being hands-on with her, the dancers can really get into the details of the movement.

“The piece is very simple, which I guess can be complicated for some dancers. The couple supports each other in the most vulnerable ways, holding the heart and touching each other’s hands. It isn’t a duet with overbearing partnering but more about the simplicity of being in a relationship and moving through the world together.”

Dancers perform in Ailey II’s Rusty, a piece that explores trust and growing in relationships.