

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

REVELATIONS (1960)

Choreography: Alvin Ailey

Music: Traditional

Décor and Costumes: Ves Harper

Costumes for "Rocka My Soul" redesigned by Barbara Forbes

Lighting Design: Nicola Cernovitch

Since its creation in 1960, *Revelations* has consistently enraptured audiences all over the world with the perfect blend of reverent grace and spiritual elation. Alvin Ailey's signature masterpiece pays homage to and reflects the cultural heritage of the African-American, what Ailey thought of as one of America's richest treasures—"sometimes sorrowful, sometimes jubilant, but always hopeful." Choreographed when he was only 29 years old, *Revelations* is an intimate reflection inspired by childhood memories of attending services at Mount Olive Baptist Church in Texas, and by the work of writers James Baldwin and Langston Hughes. Set to a suite of traditional gospel spirituals, *Revelations* zealously explores the emotional spectrum of the human condition, from the deepest of grief to the holiest of joy. A classic tribute to the resolve and determination of a people, the ballet has been seen by more people around the world than any other modern work.



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*. Photo by Paul Kolnik

Of its creation, Ailey once recalled: "First I did it chronologically, leading off with the opening part of *Revelations*, which was the earliest in time. It was about trying to get up out of the ground. The costumes and the set would be colored brown, an earth color, for coming out of the earth, for going into the earth. The second part was something that was very close to me- the baptismal, the purification rite. Its colors would be white and pale blue. Then there would be the section surrounding the gospel church, the holy rollers and all the church happiness. Its colors would be earth tones, yellow and black."

The ballet premiered at the 92nd Street YM-YWHA on January 31st, 1960, and since then has been performed a countless number of times all over the world, was part of Opening Ceremonies of the 1968 Olympics, and has been presented on four separate occasions at the White House, including at the inaugurations of Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. The piece has had numerous film and television broadcasts since it appeared on the CBS in the special *Lamp Under my Feet* in 1962. Its longitude has allowed it to act as a catalyst for the introduction of modern dance to young generations; furthermore, a *Revelations* Residency program has been created and instilled in a number of public schools, offering a comprehensive study of language, arts and social study using the ballet as its inspirational framework.



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*. Photo by Paul Kolnik

The young genius Alvin Ailey combined the famous Horton technique, which manifests itself in so much of his work, along with his own astounding choreographic vision to create a series of movement that intertwines impossible strength and ethereal grace. After five decades, this American classic has proven to be a cultural landmark in the world of dance effortlessly maintaining its undeniable qualities of astonishing originality and powerful elegance while continuing to inspire and enthrall audiences everywhere.

ALVIN AILEY ON *REVELATIONS*

“This suite explores motivations and emotions of African American religious music which, like its heir to the Blues, takes many forms – ‘true spirituals’ with their sustained melodies, ring shouts, song-sermons, gospel songs, and holy blues – songs of trouble, love and deliverance,” Alvin Ailey wrote for the premiere of *Revelations* on January 31, 1960, at the Kaufmann Concert Hall, 92nd Street YM-YWHA.

According to Alvin Ailey, *Revelations* began with the music. It is infused with what he terms “blood memories” – memories of his Texas youth, growing up with the sounds of spirituals and gospel music. As Ailey noted, this piece was about his early memories filled with “profound feeling, with faith, hope, joy and sometimes sadness, the choirs, congregations, deacons, preachers and ushers would sing black spirituals and gospel songs. They sang and played the music with such fervor that even as a small child I could not only hear it but almost see it. I remember hearing *Wade in the Water* being sung during baptism and hearing the pastor’s wife sing *I’ve Been ‘Buked, I’ve Been Scorned* one Sunday during testifying time. I tried to put all of that feeling into *Revelations*.”

REVELATIONS

Of the three sections, “The first was called ‘Pilgrim of Sorrow.’ I took all of the songs dealing with black people’s sorrow and put them in this section; at the time there were about five or six songs. It was about trying to get up out of the ground. The costumes and the set would be colored brown, an earth color, for coming out of the earth, for going into the earth.” –Alvin Ailey

PILGRIM OF SORROW

I Been ‘Buked; Music arranged by Hall Johnson*

Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel; Music arranged by James Miller+

Fix Me, Jesus; Music arranged by Hall Johnson*

“The second part was something that was very close to me- the baptismal, the purification rite. Its colors would be white and pale blue. The middle section was to be ‘Wading in the Water.’ Songs such as ‘Honor, Honor’ had all of these extraordinary words. I was moved by what spirituals say as words, as metaphors. So I found these short songs for the middle section.” –Alvin Ailey

TAKE ME TO THE WATER

Processional/Honor, Honor; Music adapted and arranged by Howard A. Roberts

Wade in the Water; Music adapted and arranged by Howard A. Roberts

“Wade in the Water” sequence by Ella Jenkins. “A Man Went Down to the River” is an original composition by Ella Jenkins.

I Wanna Be Ready; Music arranged by James Miller

“Then there would be the section surrounding the gospel church, the holy rollers and all the church happiness. Its colors would be earth tones, yellow and black. There were quite a few songs for the last section, ‘Move Members, Move.’ The whole ballet was a giant suite of spirituals. I poured in just about everything, every beautiful spiritual I had ever heard.” –Alvin Ailey

MOVE, MEMBERS, MOVE

Sinner Man; Music adapted and arranged by Howard A. Roberts

The Day is Past and Gone; Music arranged by Howard A. Roberts and Brother John Sellers

You May Run On; Music arranged by Howard A. Roberts and Brother John Sellers

Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham; Music adapted and arranged by Howard A. Roberts

Revelations is considered Ailey’s signature work, and although it is viewed as a dance drama of elegance and sophistication framing African American motifs in an artistic mode, the ballet is an icon that stands as sign post of the victorious thoughts and survival mechanisms that enabled enslaved Africans to keep their minds on freedom.

Ailey said about the music of *Revelations*, “I’m not afraid to say there is not one song in *Revelations* that doesn’t hold the listener’s interest. The songs are poetic, and the rhythm that grows out of them is Black rhythm. The songs are truthful and a real coming together of music and ideas through dance. The songs also represent a coming together of things in my head – of youth energy and enthusiasm, of my concern about projecting the Black image properly. They reflect my own feelings about being pressed into the ground of Texas, they re-create the music I heard from ladies in Texas who sold apples while singing spirituals, memories of my mother humming around the house and the songs I sang in junior high school. We would sing *Rocka My Soul* in my junior high glee club. The songs in *Revelations* are all of those things. And I think they have meant a lot to audiences everywhere.”

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All performances of *Revelations* are permanently endowed by a generous gift from Donald L. Jonas in celebration of the birthday of his wife Barbara and her deep commitment to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.