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Ailey meets Ellington in 'Pas de Duke' and more

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Choreographer Alvin Ailey once said, "First get people into the theater; then you can show them anything you want." The late choreographer not only got audiences of all ages into the theater, he kept them coming back for more. Now in its 56th year, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is one of the most popular modern dance companies in the world, known for nurturing, preserving, and presenting a wide range of contemporary styles, especially from the African-American cultural experience.



The company's Celebrity Series run May 1-4 marks its 44th appearance in Boston. The troupe brings two programs: one dedicated to Ailey's work with jazz legend Duke Ellington, the other featuring the Boston premiere of a new commission by Azure Barton, along with Wayne McGregor's "Chroma" and Bill T. Jones's "D-Man in the Waters (Part I)."

While most Ailey programs are family-friendly by their very nature, the Ailey-Ellington program offers a double treat, highlighting music by one of jazz's most influential trailblazers. The finale, Ailey's "Revelations," is considered one of the most stirring masterpieces of 20th-century dance. Choreographed in 1960 to spirituals and gospel songs, the work touches on spiritual yearning, profound faith, the depths of grief, and the joy of hope. While it draws on what Ailey called the "blood memories" of his early upbringing in rural Texas, its themes have a universal appeal.

Robert Battle, the Ailey company's artistic director since 2011, remembers seeing "Revelations" as a teenager and says that experience helped fuel an early interest in modern dance. "I grew up going to church so I had some sense of the context and the historic weight of the work. Then to see those bodies moving in such a deep and spiritual way. . . . That moment of understanding something outside of yourself but that has some connection with what's inside, having that mirror effect in seeing a work of art, is quite a powerful moment. I remember thinking: I totally get it, and now I'm empowered. I know why people cry when see this work."

The Ellington pieces offer a range of perspectives. Ellington and Ailey collaborated intensely on "The River," which marked the Duke's first symphonic score for dance. It was originally choreographed in 1970 not for Ailey's own company but for American Ballet Theatre, and for many seasons it was one of the company's standard closers. Ailey associate artistic director Masazumi Chaya, the foremost living expert on Ailey's repertory, has restaged the work anew for this season's presentation.

"Night Creature" (1974) is an homage to Ellington's symphonic work of the same name, capturing the composer's claim that "Night creatures, unlike stars, do not come OUT at night — they come ON, each thinking that, before the night is out, he or she will be the star." Battle notes the work's engaging rhythms and physicality. "The dancers are doing incredible things. There's a bit of competition in the work, and young people can relate to that sense of trying to best somebody. It's hip, and they have fun with it."



“Pas de Duke” was choreographed in 1976 to showcase the unique talents of the company’s reigning diva, Judith Jamison, and one of the ballet world’s most brilliant dancers, Mikhail Baryshnikov. Baryshnikov made a fascinating contrast to Jamison stylistically, which Ailey highlighted in this playfully competitive dance.

Battle says that Ailey’s work transcends the passage of time, which often dates older modern-dance works. When some of the younger dancers begin tackling older Ailey pieces for the first time, he says, “You can always sense Ailey’s spirit in the room. That shared common humanity that runs through his work makes it timeless and makes it connect. That sense of being disconnected we all feel —

his work manages to break through that, and you find yourself being open to the exchange happening through the dancers. You don’t get a sense of looking at something archival. You get a sense of something fresh and happening now.”

Celebrity Series executive director Gary Dunning says he believes that resonates across the age spectrum. “I’m not sure Alvin or his company set out to claim family-friendly territory, but I think that the initial values he brought to the company and his choreography have that kind of broad multi-generational appeal. In ‘Revelations’ especially, there are moral lessons, aspirational values, narratives of suffering and overcoming that any family would gravitate toward. It’s something that we remind ourselves of to teach to our children.”

