



## New Ailey Dance Pays Tribute to Civil Rights Icon

By: Jocelyn Noveck (AP National Writer)

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AP Photo/Steve Wilson

It would seem the timing could hardly be more apt for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's new civil rights-themed piece, "Odetta," a tribute to the late folk singer often referred to as the voice of the civil rights movement.

"I'd like to take credit," quips Robert Battle, artistic director at Ailey, of the timing, noting that the ballet arrives and soon tours the country just as a national conversation percolates over the state of civil rights in America, sparked by the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. "There's clearly something going on that's very important."

Of course, he adds, the piece was planned long before those events. Battle says he got the idea for "Odetta" when he attended a memorial for the singer, who sang at the historic 1963 March on Washington and influenced singers like Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and Janis Joplin, in 2008, the year of her death. (Her full name was Odetta Holmes, but she went by her first name.)

Battle wasn't yet at Ailey he arrived in 2011, succeeding Judith Jamison, Ailey's famous muse who ran the company for 21 years. "But I was thinking, this would make a wonderful dance," he says.

To find a choreographer, he didn't go far he turned to his rehearsal director, the veteran Ailey dancer Matthew Rushing, who uses 10 of Odetta's recordings including "This Little Light of Mine" and "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" in a work that can be called lightly biographical. Dancer Hope Boykin, another Ailey veteran, represents the spirit of Odetta in the piece. Highlights include the whimsical "A Hole in the Bucket" and Odetta's cover of the biting Dylan anti-war song "Masters of War." (Dylan's been quoted as saying that Odetta turned him on to folk singing.)

On opening night this week, guests included singer Harry Belafonte, who smiled in the audience as his own duet with Odetta to "A Hole in the Bucket" played onstage, with dancers Rachael McLaren and Marcus Jarrell Willis miming the words. Also in the crowd: opera singer Jessye Norman, folk singer Suzanne Vega and a more recent luminary, actress Laverne Cox of "Orange Is the New Black" the first openly transgender person to be nominated for an Emmy.

For Rushing, who's long been one of the most beloved Ailey dancers, it was a big moment only his second solo choreographic effort for the company.

"When Mr. Battle presented this idea," he says, "there was a lot I didn't know about Odetta's work and who she was. I did a lot of research, listening to her music and watching interview footage, and I honestly fell in love with her and what she stood for."

Rushing, who already has two jobs at Ailey guest artist and rehearsal director hadn't been certain that he wanted to delve into choreography at all. He quips that he still isn't certain, but that Odetta's music helped calm his nerves.

"Once I got into her music I felt a strong connection, and that helped me with my issues with choreography," Rushing says. He also tried, he adds, to create a piece that wasn't about using his own voice as a choreographer, but rather about channeling the energy and personality of the dancers particularly the joyful Boykin.

"Look at Mr. Ailey, and how he choreographed 'Cry' for Ms. Jamison," Rushing says, referring to Ailey's famous tribute to black womanhood honoring his own mother. "Hope was the first person who came to mind she has Odetta's strength and also her spirituality, and dedication to her art form."

"Odetta," which features 11 dancers, will be performed frequently during the company's current season at New York City Center, including on Dec. 31 Odetta's birthday. It will then be featured on a 19-city national tour, beginning in February.

Battle says the current discussion on racial issues in America only makes the piece more relevant. But, he notes, everyone should take from it what they please. "We're dancers, and we let the art speak for itself," he says.