

DANCE

The continuing 'Revelations' of a modern classic

BY CELIA WREN

"It's pretty clear that there's a love affair between audiences and 'Revelations,' choreographer Alvin Ailey wrote in his autobiography, speaking of the work that would become the signature of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. He was not overstating the case. Set to traditional African American spirituals that lend it historical, cultural and religious meaning — and that trace a dramatic journey from sorrow and longing to joy — "Revelations" has proved endlessly popular since its premiere in 1960. The Ailey company estimates that it has been seen by more than 23 million people in 71 countries — a larger audience than has viewed any other modern dance work.

"Revelations" is a classic because "it's so brilliantly crafted," says company artistic director Robert Battle, who caught a performance while he was growing up in Miami and credits that event with steering him toward a dance career. On one hand, he observes, the piece deals with American history and the African American experience. On the other, he has seen "Revelations" enrapture audiences abroad. Although Ailey "was speaking about something specific, really it was about the human condition, and about hope being triumphant," Battle says.

In a passage in his autobiography, Ailey somewhat ruefully recalled having tried to taper off on the company's "Revelations" performances, only to have the public clamor for the piece. The company even had to be careful not to position "Revelations" too early in a concert. "Once we did it first on a program," Ailey recalled. "Everybody went home after it was over."

During its annual Kennedy Center engagement, which starts Feb. 2, the Ailey company will present a

diverse slate of pieces. Highlights will include the local debut of "Awakening," the first new work choreographed by Battle since he took up the company leadership in 2011, and Washington premieres of dances by Rennie Harris and Ronald K. Brown. But "Revelations" will feature on every lineup — as the finale, of course.

The first performance

"Revelations" premiered on Jan. 31, 1960, at the 92nd Street Y in New York City, in a performance that featured live singers and lasted more than an hour.

"I had never seen anything like it. Neither had anyone in the audience," recalls Sylvia Waters, a dancer who was watching from the seats that afternoon and who joined the Ailey company in 1968. It was not unusual to see worthwhile work at the 92nd Street Y, "a hub for modern dance" at the time, she says. But "Revelations" was a class apart. The music bowled her over, as did the dance's shapes and colors. "Once it was over, there was such a roar of applause and bravos," she remembers. Afterwards, the audience members gathered in the lobby "talking and buzzing about it."

Over the course of the next few years, Ailey trimmed and refined "Revelations," reaching a relatively final version in 1964. The piece currently runs a little over 30 minutes and is typically performed with between 14 and 22 performers.

The music

For "Revelations," Ailey (1931-1989) drew on his memories of a churchgoing childhood in Texas. He vividly recalled hearing a minister's wife sing "I Been 'Buked," and he recalled witnessing a baptism at a lake while a choir sang "Wade in the Water." Both of those spirituals made their way into the final "Revelations" score, which Ai-

ley organized loosely thematically: Songs that he considered dealt with "black people's sorrow" went in the first section ("Pilgrim of Sorrow"); songs relevant to baptism and purifi-

TOP: Members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater perform "Revelations." It will be among the troupe's pieces during its engagement at the Kennedy Center. **ABOVE:** Ailey, who drew on his childhood memories in creating the work.



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cation in the second section ("Take Me to the Water"); and songs pertaining to churchgoers' fervor and jubilation in the third section ("Move, Members, Move"). The history of spirituals, originally created by enslaved people in America, imbued the piece with pain, longing and — by the work's joyful end — a feeling of catharsis.

The dancers

Currently, some 44 dancers frequently perform "Revelations," counting all the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company members and the dancers in Ailey II, the troupe founded in 1974 to nurture young talent. Dancers may take different roles or positions in the work from performance to performance, staving off monotony. Company member Jacqueline Green, a Baltimore native, says that, in any case, it's not hard to stay excited about "Revelations," because the dance taps into such a broad spectrum of feeling. "Every time I get onstage to do 'Revelations,' I feel something different," she says.

Samantha Figgins, a D.C. native who joined the company in 2014, says a particularly tricky part of "Revelations" occurs when female dancers sit on stools in "Move, Members, Move." "Making sure you know how far you have to be from the stool, so that you can sit down properly — I always have to map that out before I go on," she says.

The alumni

A slew of distinguished artists have danced "Revelations" in their time. Alvin Ailey performed in the piece regularly from 1960 to 1962 and then occasionally until 1965.

Judith Jamison, who joined the company in 1965, danced in "Revelations," leaving her mark on the role of the woman with the umbrella. Jamison's contributions to the company went far beyond this particular classic. In 1971, Ailey choreographed "Cry" for Jamison, and that piece became another sensation. Upon Ailey's death in 1989, Jamison succeeded him as artistic director, a position she held until 2011.

The list of notable "Revelations" alums also includes George Faison (who went on to win a Tony Award for choreographing "The Wiz"), Miguel Godreau, Desmond Richardson (co-founder of

Complexions Contemporary Ballet), Elizabeth Roxas, Clive Thompson, Dudley Williams and Donna Wood, to name just a few. Sylvia Waters, who was in the audience for the debut of "Revelations" in 1960, learned the piece after she joined the company in 1968; she went on to hold the artistic director post at Ailey II for 38 years.

The rehearsal director

Matthew Rushing, who has performed every single male "Revelations" role in his time, says he maintains enthusiasm for the piece by remembering his "life-changing" first viewing of it, as a preteen in Los Angeles. That experience put him on the road to becoming a dancer (he joined the Ailey company in 1992), choreographer (his "ODETTA" is among the upcoming Ailey offerings at the Kennedy Center), and, currently, the Ailey company's rehearsal director.

In this last capacity, one of his ongoing concerns is paring back any extraneous touches dancers feel inspired to tack on to the "Revelations" choreography. "Because we do perform the ballet so often, sometimes it's easy for an artist to feel, 'I need to go further, I need to give more in this performance.' And sometimes 'giving more' leads a dancer into adding to the work," Rushing says. His message is, "As an artist, you are bringing yourself to the work. The work still must remain as is."

The umbrella

The white umbrella that a female dancer holds in the central "Take Me to the Water" section is an iconic image from "Revelations." You don't buy umbrellas that are this poetic: You make them. Kristin Colvin Young, production stage manager for the Ailey company, says a commercially purchased golf-size umbrella forms the skeleton of this "Revelations" prop; a light white fabric, layered over the top, dangles over the original umbrella-canopy rim, moving as the dancer moves. The white fabric wrinkles easily, Young says. "So whenever we take it out, whatever theater we're at, the props crew has to steam it."

When on tour, the company typically travels with three umbrellas so that dancers have a choice and there are a couple of backups. "It doesn't happen very often, but occasionally the umbrella won't open, or it will open and get stuck, things like that," Young says.

The umbrellas are relatively durable, unlike the fans that women carry near the end of "Revelations." Spray-painted yellow, the fans get a lot of wear and tend to break down over time. "There are twigs flying out of the fans sometimes," says dancer Figgins.

The costumes

Ves Harper designed the "Revelations" costumes, whose colors underscore salient motifs: browns signifying the earth, whites suggesting cleansing and renewal, blacks and yellows evoking the strength and religious ardor of a church community.

The dancers do their part in making the costumes work. When preparing for "Move, Members, Move," it is essential for a female performer to rigorously secure her yellow hat to her head, Figgins says. The hats have straps that are disguised with makeup, but there's also a mesh at the top that allows for bobby pins. Use too few pins and the hat "will slide off, or you will be dancing with a stiff neck and [won't do] much movement, because you're worried about your hat," Figgins says. She adds, "After doing 'Revelations' for so long, you know what you have to do to make it seamless."

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Alvin Ailey American Dance

Theater Feb. 2-7 at the Kennedy Center, 2700 F St. NW. Tickets: \$49-\$199. 202-467-4600. kennedy-center.org.