

San Francisco Chronicle

Review: Classic 'Revelations' feeds the soul as Alvin Ailey company returns to Cal Performances

By: Rachel Howard

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Datebook

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Christopher Duggan

'Revelations' feeds the soul

Alvin Ailey dance troupe offers a stellar performance of its namesake's 1960 work

By Rachel Howard

Alvin Ailey's "Revelations" is back in the flesh — and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is dancing it as rousing as ever.

If you've never seen "Revelations," or haven't gotten a dose in a few years, make haste to the Ailey company's current run at UC Berkeley's Cal Performances, where this eternal and indestructible 1960 classic is slated to cap every program (there are five of them) on offer through Sunday, April 3. And brace yourself, as one longtime fan was heard telling a newcomer on opening night Thursday, March 29, "You're about to go to church."

That was especially true with Sarah Daley-Perdomo projecting equal parts physical strength and emotional vulnerability in "Fix Me, Jesus," and James Gilmer, Chalvar Monteiro and Kanji Segawa racing like tornadoes through "Sinner Man." Yes, the whole audience clapped along with "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham." And, yes, there was an encore.

But plenty more merited celebration as the Ailey troupe took the Zellerbach Hall stage for the first time since its last pre-pandemic visit in 2019, continuing a 54-year relationship with Cal Performances that dates back almost to the company's founding in 1958. As Artistic Director Robert Battle told the jubilant crowd, "The last few years made us acutely aware of the fragility of life, and the fragility of democracy. ... I believe we should revel in this moment because of it all and in spite of it all."

And Battle had a personal milestone to revel in: the 10th anniversary of his appointment to helm the company. To mark this, opening night offered seven full works or excerpts from Battle's oeuvre — "like a



Dario Calmese

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, top, in its namesake's 1960 work "Revelations." Above, dancer Jeroboam Bozeman.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday-Thursday, March 30-31; 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, April 1-2; 3 p.m. Sunday, April 3. \$37-\$110. Zellerbach Hall, UC Berkeley. 510-642-9988. <https://calperformances.org>

buffet, except you have to eat everything," he quipped. Happily, this was a varied and satisfying meal with plenty of flavor in the side dishes.

The newest work, 2021's "For Four," set a quartet of the company's most vibrant — and hair-flinging — personalities loose to some really kicking trum-

peting by Wynton Marsalis from his "Black Codes" album. Ashley Kaylynn Green was the star force here, shouting for joy and letting go, but also hopping up into the cleanest, most balletic cabriole jumps.

Other selections also tended toward short and potent dancer showcases: Jacquelin Harris and Patrick Coker in sequined tuxedo tails finding the sweet spot between physical comedy and precision in "Ella"; Ashley Mayeux and James Gilmer (an alum of San Francisco's own ODC/Dance) clinging, flinging and unbelievably back-bending to opera legend Leontyne Price's otherworldly vibrato in "Unfold"; Yannick Lebrun crouching in a muscled ball that, under Burke Wilmore's shadowy lighting, called to mind the forms of Edward Weston photographs, before arching in silent screams to Nina Simone singing "Wild Is the Wind."

Finally, Segawa in red ruffled pants and bare chest matched the rapid-fire groove of classical Indian kathak rhythms in "Takademe." That last selection could be crowned the most effective virtuoso role of Battle's body of work.

There was also some meat and potatoes on this program in "Mass," a strangely tense ensemble drama inspired by the simultaneous individuality and group force of vocal choirs. But the mysterious dourness of "Mass" was nearly wiped from mind by the journey through determination to joy in the final movement of 2004's "Love Stories," in which Christopher R. Wilson especially seemed to channel the elation of Stevie Wonder's music.

As interesting as the diverse gifts of the dancers was the choreography's cumulative impression. Most strikingly, you hope these dancers get to wear

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The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in its namesake's wide-ranging 1960 work "Revelations."

Star performance by Ailey troupe

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kneepads in rehearsal — every dance involved regularly flinging one's joints to the floor and rising as though nothing had happened.

But, more important, the dances look tailor-made to Ailey. Someone newer to seeing the troupe might never guess that fewer than half of these dances by Battle were made on the company, and only one was made since Battle became artistic director. The Ailey troupe is what's known as a "repertory company," dedicated to offering a variety of new choreography alongside the classics Ailey himself bequeathed it. This means that Battle has focused on acquiring work by other choreographers — like the hip-hop-grounded Rennie Harris and the theatrically brilliant Aszure Barton, who will be featured on other programs in this run — over continuing the choreography career he had built as founder of his



Andrew Eccles

Robert Battle has spent 10 years leading the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

own company, Battle-works.

Seeing Battle's work en masse, you both appreciate his distinguished choreography gifts and appreciate all the more how patiently he shelved them in order to serve the greater needs of this massive institution, whose ultimate strength is its dancers. Dance companies, like great works of art, don't really have eternal life. But under Battle, it feels that way with Ailey.

Rachel Howard is a Bay Area freelance writer.