

Alvin Ailey company returns to Toronto with a dance work about Nelson Mandela

By: Michael Crabb

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“Survivors” was made in 1986 response to Nelson Mandela’s imprisonment, but it’s a “universal statement about injustice.”

In 1986, revered Black American choreographer Alvin Ailey made a ferocious protest work in response to Nelson Mandela’s more than two decades of imprisonment under the heel of South Africa’s apartheid government.

It focused on the anguish of Mandela and his then wife, Winnie, separated by prison bars but still united in their determination to achieve justice for Black South Africans. Ailey called the ballet “Survivors.” If he had lived just a few weeks longer, Ailey would have been able to celebrate

Mandela’s release in February 1990, a momentous event that paved the way for a fresh and more hopeful chapter in South Africa’s history.

Now, in honour of Black History Month, the New York-based Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, arguably the world’s most enduringly popular dance troupe, has included “Survivors” in the repertoire for its latest Toronto visit as a reminder that the fight against oppression and anti-Black racism is still far from won. “Alvin made it about the life of Winnie and Nelson Mandela, but he was really making a universal statement about injustice,” said 50-year-old artistic director Robert Battle, now in his 12th season at the company helm. “I think about that word ‘Survivors’ in so many contexts; surviving the pandemic, dealing with all of the racial reckoning that has been going on. It makes the work very timely.”

“Survivors,” co-choreographed with Mary Barnett, had been absent from the Ailey repertoire for three decades before Battle, surveying the social and political landscape, decided to revive it. “My instinct told me that it was time to bring it back. When Nelson Mandela died, we got the news just as we’d begun a performance at New York City Center. During the intermission, just before Alvin’s beloved “Revelations,” I came out onstage and let the audience know Mandela had just passed, and that we were dedicating that night’s performance to his life and his memory. From that moment on, I was determined to revive ‘Survivors.’”

Reviving a long dormant work is a painstaking task. To complicate matters, the raging percussion score by drummer/composer Max Roach, emotionally intensified by the baleful calls of singer Abbey Lincoln, was a big challenge for the dancers. “It’s not really counted,” Battle explained. “The percussion is more of an explosion. There’s a lot that is internal rhythm and a lot of screaming.” A video recording of the original exists, but that is not enough to restage a ballet in detail. Fortunately, Battle’s associate artistic director at the time was Masazumi Chaya, a company veteran who had assisted Ailey on the 1986 original. Slowly the choreography, for a lead couple and almost choruslike ensemble of three women and two men, came together for its 2022 revival.

From the moment Alvin Ailey founded his company almost 65 years ago he intended it to be a repertory troupe, not an exclusive platform for his own choreography, and so it has remained. Ailey’s iconic “Revelations” is the only work included on the two different programs the company is bringing to Toronto, the first and only Canadian stop in a 22-city tour that keeps the dancers on the road and their toes through May. In addition to “Survivors,” included in Saturday night’s program, Battle is also bringing back Ailey’s 1975, sassily joyous, “Night Creature.”

“I remember seeing a video of it as a young and aspiring dancer in Miami,” Battle recalled. “At that time, modern dance to me was supposed to be serious. Then to see ‘Night Creature’ with all the humour, the coquettishness, the flirtation and, of course, Duke Ellington’s music, it just fascinated me.”

The same program — Friday night and Saturday’s matinee — includes “Reflections in D,” a short emotionally expressive solo Ailey made for himself in 1963, plus two short works by Battle himself. He made “Unfold,” a sensuous duet to an aria from a Gustave Charpentier opera in 2007. By contrast, 2021’s “For Four” is a jubilant, jaunty dance quartet set to a jazzy Wynton Marsalis score — in 4/4 time, of course.

Apart from “Survivors” and the show-closing “Revelations,” Saturday night will also mark the Canadian premiere of much-in-demand choreographer and MacArthur fellow Kyle Abraham’s “Are You in Your Feelings?” Set to a mixtape of soul, hip hop and R&B, this new work is an affirmative celebration of Black culture, its music, its energy and perseverance.