

[Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater review – extraordinary soul-stirring dance](#)

By: Lyndsey Winship

August 24, 2023



The American company brought Ailey's legendary Revelations, still hugely powerful after 65 years, alongside modern pieces of precision and fire.

The thing about the dancers of [Alvin Ailey](#) American Dance Theater is that they are precision performers – technique visible, placings academic – but at the same time, they can elasticate and undulate their bodies; they can be sensual and spiritual. Above all, they dance with great sincerity.

On one hand, they are still performing many works of founder Alvin Ailey, who died in 1989, including the legendary [Revelations](#) (1960). On the other, under the direction now of Robert Battle, they are gracing the stage to Drake and Kendrick Lamar in work that is bang up to date. This opening programme for the Edinburgh international festival was supposed to include two newer works, [Kyle Abraham's](#) Are You in Your Feelings? and Aszure Barton's [Busk](#), alongside Revelations, but due to injury, Busk was replaced by [Twyla Tharp's](#) Roy's Joys (1997).

Roy's Joys is a very nice piece, set to 1940s and 1950s jazz tracks from trumpeter Roy Eldridge. It's a dance of cool cats who never break a sweat, with soundless landings and sophisticated deportment. There's much that's politely balletic, but Tharp dissolves styles together: slinky jazz, modern, swing, a bit of soft-shoe shuffle. And it gives the dancers a chance to show off the real quality of their movement with some impeccable control of weight and dynamics and their sharp ears to the nuances of the music.

The oldest and newest works in this programme are vastly different but have much in common. In Revelations, Ailey depicted the world of the American south that he grew up in, a community based around church, and the solidarity and struggle of African Americans. The characters interact in social spaces rather than being bodies on an abstract stage. It comes from lived experience, which is just like Abraham's Are You In Your Feelings? set to a "mixtape" of soul and R&B, music that soundtracks people's lives. It's dancefloors and dates, love, friendship and family, the contemporary Black American experience.



Abraham also has something in common with Tharp: the effortless meshing of different kinds of dance, whether ballet, contemporary, commercial, voguing, from hip-hop's shoulder-brush straight into a classical arabesque. They'll do relevés and retirés and petit batterie to the sound of R&B singer Jazmine Sullivan. There's some future disco, and a tender and affecting duet between two men, set to Maxwell's Symptom Unknown. The whole thing becomes more and more engrossing and the dancers are excellent all-round, but there's one you can't take your eyes off. Ashley Kaylynn Green only graduated a couple of years ago, but she's lithe and swift and substantial and supple in her movement. Elementally she's flickers between earth and water, and she's certainly on fire.

The evening closes with Revelations, still powerful after all these years. There's beautiful dancing, of course, like the honey-melt of a woman falling into her partner's arms in Fix Me, Jesus. But its timelessness has a lot to do with the spirituals it is set to, and the dancers' connection to that music. Enough to stir the soul of a hardened atheist.

At [Festival theatre, Edinburgh](#), until 25 August. Then at [Sadler's Wells, London](#), 5-16 September.