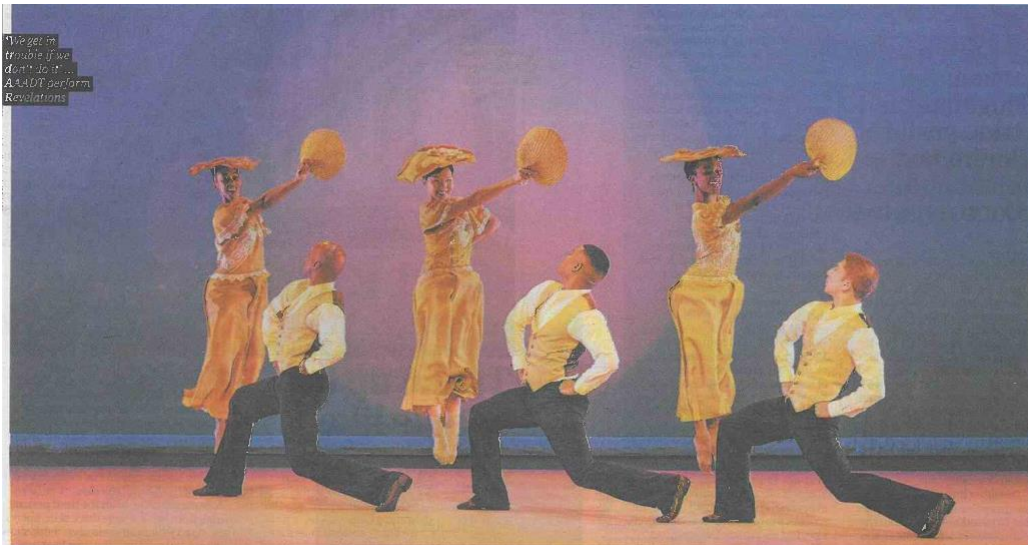


It is spirituality, made visible

By: Lyndsey Winship
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'It is spirituality, made visible'

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has been performing its founder's signature work, Revelations, all over the world for 60 years. Lyndsey Winship talks to dancers past and present about the meaning and the humanity of this historic piece

Sylvia Waters former company dancer: I saw the first performance of Revelations, which was at the 92nd Street Y, New York, in 1960. At the time you are part of history you never realise it, of course. But I had a very visceral experience – deeply soulful. It was different from anything I'd seen a dance company do. That version of Revelations was almost an hour long, and the audience reaction was explosive.

Judith Jamison former dancer and artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT), 1989-2011: I was at university in the early 60s. One of our assignments was to go see this company, Alvin Ailey. I had never heard of them but I was flabbergasted by the sight of this Black company. Think there might have been eight dancers but they filled the stage. The next day in our improv class, we were just copying everything we had seen.

SW: I saw several versions between then and 1965. Alvin edited it down to 30 minutes and it became more succinct, clearer, crisper.

JW: It was a shower of blessings seeing Mr Ailey dance. He looked so muscular, not your usual "dancer". He had a big chest and muscles, that whole macho thing. And he was gorgeous. But the dance was flowing like water. It takes your breath away.

Constance Stanatou company dancer: When I was a very little girl – four or five – I saw a TV show about Revelations. I was in awe, growing up in the 80s and seeing a company full of dancers that looked like me.

Robert Battle artistic director, AAADT: My first encounter was on videotape but seeing it in person was an out-of-body experience. The piece is ultimately an expression of hope, told through a suite of spirituals. I grew up going to church. It sang in the choir. So this notion of faith and the Black experience, through tumult and slavery, was familiar. The dance



Constance Stanatou: 'It's reaching to the heavens'

was the embodiment of a kind of spirituality, made visible.

CS: I was able to really connect with Revelations because, just like Alvin, I also grew up in the south and in the church, where I heard a lot of those African American spiritual songs. So it really touched me and made me feel like, "oh, I could do this"

RB: It takes you on a journey of the African American experience and expression, and how the universal message of our common humanity shines through. You see different dance styles: the technique of Ailey's mentor, Lester Horton, his influences from Martha Graham and from African dance; movement direct from the church, vernacular steps, and balletic and classical.

CS: The movement style is very grounded. It's rooted in from the earth and reaching to the heavens. The song I been 'Buked is about coming from the dirt, the sorrow and hard times. It's like a prayer, a very soft and yearning asking for help.

SW: Alvin was a very warm person, extremely generous, and had a great sense of humour. But in teaching the steps he didn't say very much about the work, because we were under the gun learning about 10 ballets for our first Broadway season. But we would hear him sometimes when

he talked to audiences. He talked about how, for I Been 'Buked, he was inspired by the sculptures of Henry Moore – the heaviness and the fullness and the reaching, the density of the movement.

CS: Then, in Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel, you start to see a little more fight. All these spiral jumps and contractions when you're hitting the ground, almost like you're trying to break free.

Jaryd Farcon dancer with Ailey II (AAADT's company of younger dancers): I just love the quick energy of Sinner Man. It's like you are fighting for your life, you're being chased. Are you ready for the end? No! It's just a ball of energy and it's crazy.

CS: In Wade in the Water, there's a baptism, and a cloth that's used to mimic the ripples of the water. Wade Girl was probably the first role I did. I knew what that felt like, being baptised and growing up in a Baptist church. You go from calm and a little scared and not sure what this baptism is about to be, then you catch the holy ghost and you're rejoicing.

JW: The audience can't see what goes on in the wings. From Sinner Man to the Yellow section [the finale], you have less than two minutes to change. You scramble off

Obama is a huge fan. He had a poster of Judith Jamison in his college dorm room

stage and there's a full choreography behind the scenes: quick changes, people helping each other, some already in their finale costumes but helping make the water ripple.

JJ: I remember I got upset with Mr Ailey because when I first joined I was doing the duet Fix Me, Jesus with James Ttruite, and then he gave me Wade in the Water and I felt demoted! I got quietly indignant. I was standing in the wings, all poetry, then the cue came and I walked on stage and the joy took me over. That's the beauty of his choreography: it embraces you no matter how you feel.

JW: I joined Ailey II in 2020 when it was the pandemic and we had to rehearse Revelations on Zoom. It was hard to figure out which was right and left. You had to move the couch – and in New York there's not much square footage. But it was great to keep going.

JJ: It's an enduring work. People love it all over the world. There are a lot of places we go where they don't understand the words necessarily, but they know how they feel.

SW: In the Soviet Union in 1970, the audience reaction was just amazing. And all these places in Ukraine – Donetsk, Kyiv, Luhansk – when I look at what's happening now, those are places we performed. The way they responded made you feel there was no language barrier.

RB: When I became artistic director in 2011, it happened to coincide with us being in Russia. I never felt



Judith Jamison: 'The choreography embraces you'

further away from home in many ways, but when Revelations came on I saw people in the audience acting as if it were their movement, their dance, their music.

SW: We had two weeks in London in 1970 at the old Sadler's Wells. At the last performance somebody from the audience got up on stage and was dancing with us.

CS: We performed at the White House, during the Obama administration. You know, Obama is a huge fan of Ms Jamison. Apparently he had a poster of her in his dorm room in college. He was super, super nice. I remember the dogs came in and the security guards, but it was heartwarming and just friendly and really cool.

CS: We performed in Athens in 2008. We start the work with our faces up, and I remember all I could see was this midnight blue sky filled with stars and the Acropolis lit up. It was like dancing for the gods.

JW: Back in the day the repertory was limited so we would do Revelations every night. Now the company has a huge repertory, challenging the dancers to move in different ways, as Mr Ailey always wanted. But to this day people still request Revelations.

RB: In general we get in trouble if we don't do it. I've heard that even Alvin himself at some point asked if we could take Revelations out. But they told him what the box office numbers looked like with Revelations and without, and that was a sobering moment. But we are fortunate to have a work that, after so many years, still has fans that want to see it.

CS: It's extremely important to carry on that legacy. Alvin was a brilliant choreographer, and a Black gay man who was able to do all this during the height of the civil rights movement, and ran a company when we weren't really looked upon as good dancers or valuable as humans. It is a part of history and it should always be told.

SW: It is unique for a modern dance work to be seen so much, and it's a testament to Alvin's understanding of humanity and the human spirit. That, yes, people experience despair, struggle, repression, oppression, but they have the resilience and strength to go forward.

RB: When I started this job, journalists would say: "You've been doing Revelations for so long and some people say it's getting old, do you think you'll stop doing it?" And I said, "Well, when you get a stepladder and take down the Mona Lisa because so many people have seen it already. I'll do the same with Revelations". Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater are at the Edinburgh International Festival, 23-25 August, and Sadler's Wells, London, 5-16 September. Ailey II tour the UK from 15 September to 28 October

They get in trouble if we don't do it. AAADT perform Revelations

PHOTOGRAPHS: DAVID COLEMAN; DANCE: MITCHELL LATNER; AILEY II: JUDITH JAMISON; REPERTORY: PROFFERMAN; INSTITUTION: A.F. CECITY