

dance



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Ailey II's "Sketches of Flames."

Alvin Ailey's legacy lives on

Ailey II performs today at Aspen District Theatre

Andrew Travers
The Aspen Times

Troy Powell is carrying on the legacy of legendary choreographer Alvin Ailey with Ailey II, the young, 12-member dance company that will perform tonight at the Aspen District Theatre.

Powell, the artistic director of Ailey II, has spent nearly his entire life exploring and performing Ailey's groundbreaking work reflecting the African-American journey. He began dancing in the Ailey School in New York at age 9, went on to become a member of Ailey II and then joined the ranks of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater — the iconic company founded in 1958 — before taking over Ailey II six years ago.

Powell's company will perform three original pieces in the Aspen program, balancing the new with the classic. "Sketches of Flames," which Ailey II premiered last year, will be followed by 2016's "Stream of Consciousness" and the evening will close with Alvin Ailey's "Revelations," the 1960 masterpiece that announced him as a genius of modern dance incorporating African-American spirituals and sermons, gospel and blues and telling the African-American story from slavery to freedom.

Before heading west for a seven-stop Rocky Mountain tour including two performances hosted by Aspen Santa Fe Ballet in its dual homes, Powell spoke by phone from New York.

Andrew Travers: Tell me about this program, balancing these new works with a classic like "Revelations." How do they complement one another?

Troy Powell: When I'm programming for a certain city, I want that city and the audience to get a vast range of diversity, a range of different styles, as well as how each piece has its own intent. So when you're watching the program you're getting something different from each piece.

IF YOU GO ...

What: Ailey II, presented by Aspen Santa Fe Ballet

Where: Aspen District Theatre

When: Today, 7:30 p.m.

How much: \$36 to \$94

Tickets: Wheeler Opera House box office; www.aspenshowtix.com

You're not sitting there watching the same thing.

AT: So what are some of the stylistic differences we'll see this weekend?

TP: The newer works will definitely cater to this generation. "Sketches of Flames," with choreography by Bridget Moore — it's young, fresh, energetic. It has a flamenco feel. And younger audiences can definitely relate to that one. "Stream of Consciousness" by Marcus Jarrell Willis — that's another one we released last year. He wanted to take a concept of different types of sleeping experiences, like sleepwalking and insomnia. And "Revelations," of course, is Alvin Ailey's classic masterpiece. And it can go either way. Older people have seen "Revelations" since the beginning of time. I think younger kids will profit from it now, because that piece is timeless.

AT: You've spent your whole career in the Ailey dance family. What do you think you learned as a dancer in the company that you bring to your position as artistic director?

TP: It's funny, I've been here a very long time. It's been four decades. I started when I was 9 years old. The thing that I really learned that I'm trying to teach the dancers of Ailey II is what I learned about humanity through this artform. Mr. Ailey encouraged us to be individuals. He always encouraged us to be ourselves and approach the work in the most humanistic way possible. I learned that when I was very young



COURTESY PHOTO

Alvin Ailey's 1960 classic "Revelations" is among the pieces to be performed by Ailey II today at the Aspen District Theatre.

AILEY II

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and when I was young I didn't understand it — I just wanted to dance. I just wanted to do movement. It was as I got older and started doing a lot of Mr. Ailey's work that I had to pull a lot of myself into the work and tell my own story through it. Then I began to get it. And the only way you can do that is to maintain your humanity.

AT: How do you creatively differentiate Ailey II from Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater? What sets it apart?

TP: I think it's great for these young dancers to be able to perform for colleagues and audiences their own age, especially dancers their own age. They may not know there's this company that's an outlet after college and to begin a career. We are continuously training our dancers. We meet these young dancers in all the cities that we go to — we perform at a lot of colleges and go to a lot of high schools and do a lot of outreach and connect with a lot of dancers who are around the same age. They feel like there is hope and there is a way or a chance for them to dance with a company that is young. A lot of people

think you have to be a certain age to be a professional dancer — our dancers' ages range from 21 to 24, which is pretty young.

AT: For those young audiences, and audiences in general, how do you want Ailey II's work to participate in the current political and cultural conversation about race, representation, the re-emergence of white supremacist movements and sentiments in the Trump administration — all this tumult of the current moment?

TP: Alvin Ailey created a movement when he started the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and his legacy lives

on. His legacy is profound and we want to continue that in these troubling times as we have for so many years. This is not the first time any of this is happening. We need to remind our dancers that this isn't new, we've been through these times before, been through racism and trials and tribulations. At the end of the day, we use dance as a safe space — not to distract you from all that's going on in the world, but to do what you love in this world and use your passion. Mr. Ailey was all about the people and all about the human race.

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