



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Brings A Dance For Troubled Times

By: Alicia Zuckerman

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Seeing Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for the first time is a rite of passage for anyone who loves dance (and for plenty of people who didn't know they did). Jamar Roberts first saw the company perform in Fort Lauderdale when he was a kid growing up in South Dade. Like so many of us, the first Ailey dance that swept him away was "Revelations," and for him, it was specifically the "Sinner Man" section. He's told he cried, though he doesn't remember that.

By the time he was 18, Roberts was dancing with the company. Now he's choreographed his first dance for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. The company performs at the Adrienne Arsht Center in Miami this week, from February 22 to 25. Three of the four dances on the opening night program are by people from Miami. (The one that's not is Alvin Ailey's "Revelations"). Besides Roberts, the company's artistic director, Robert Battle, grew up in Liberty City. Jamar Roberts' dance is "Members Don't Get Weary" (see video below), set to music from John Coltrane's 1961 album, "Olé." It's on the Saturday (February 24) matinee program, too.

Listen to a conversation with Jamar Roberts [here](#) (20 minutes), or read an excerpt below:



WLRN: Why did you decide to set this dance to the music of John Coltrane?

ROBERTS: There wasn't a piece in the rep [repertoire] that used his music at all, and I was just kind of like, how is that possible? Because he's so iconic. Another reason was because I wanted to use the jazz language, the jazz vernacular, the sound that is so inherent to the African-American culture and tradition. ... Another reason is because the music is really complicated, and I wanted that challenge of sort of digging in there and trying to understand it, and then also seeing how I can use that to communicate my ideas through dance. How can I tether these sounds as close to these sounds as I possibly can, so they become enmeshed? So the dance is the music and the music is the dance.

... He [Coltrane] said he wanted to be a force of good with his music. He really wanted to spread this message of the good in humanity because there is good and there's evil, and he wanted to be this pervasive goodness, which I thought would be really helpful in the times that we're living in right now.

So when you listen to the music it has the feeling of heroic-ism and of -- I don't know, to me it gets really big and it's very expansive and it has this feeling of being beyond. And also the word olé, I've heard a myth about this word olé [that] it comes from Allah meaning God, and I guess -- the African-American tradition, and their relationship to the church and to God, I just wanted to make that whole connection. But there's tons of reasons for why I chose music. I'm just going to give you a few because we have limited time.

From my perspective, you can't go wrong with using John Coltrane, although I do imagine it as a challenge in using it to make a dance on. I imagine you first sat with the music and started to build the dance around that. Is that is that how it happened?

Yeah, that's true. I sat with the music for about a year, probably more than a year. What I saw in my head sort of developed over time. Once you get to know every single sound that's about to happen -- I could sing that song for you right now, front to back ... then I think you're sort of free of trying to figure out the music, and you're able to use your imagination to color that music with dance steps.

What was the reaction from the dancers when you brought this music [to them]?

(Laughs) I remember the first reaction from my assistant. She was helping me translate the steps to the dancers. I would send her video clips of all these different dance phrases that I wanted her to learn. And she said, "I couldn't hear any music." She said, "All I heard was sound." And I think that that was very similar to what the dancers experienced. So when I taught it to them, I would teach them the dance steps without music. ... I would give it to them with a rhythm or with counts -- like bum bum bum bum bum bum -- one two three four five six. But then when the music came on, every count, every rhythm went out the window, and all they had were steps [and] like this big sound. So I think that they were really shocked and stressed. (laughs). It was just like where do I start, rhythm-wise?



Watch excerpts from Jamar Roberts' "[Members Don't Get Weary](#)" performed by Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater:

That music was written like 50, 60 years ago? So it's funny that you need to think of it as still having that kind of shock value really.

Yeah, and also when you think about the type of music that we listen to today on a regular basis, on the radio, it makes sense that they would struggle to find where the beat is, because the beats now ... are so prevalent. Like you turn the music on and you get: boom boom boom boom. You know what I mean? It's very easy.

The title of the [dance] piece, "Members Don't Get Weary," where does that come from?

The title came from the title of an album by Max Roach.

Another great jazz [musician], jazz drummer in this case.

Yeah, I think this album was also released in the mid-late Sixties, and there is a track called "Members Don't Get Weary," which was actually an old Negro spiritual from back in the day that he decided to put into the album. And my lighting designer, Brandon Baker, he ... found this record, and he was like, "I think this would be a great title." And I said, "Oh my gosh, he's right."

Why was he right?

Well because I think the piece ... deals with the Blues, and ... it's my sort of response or feelings surrounding how I feel about the state of the world today.

Which is how?

I feel that it is bad. I feel that things are a little displaced and kind of chaotic, and so I wanted to tackle those types of things. But I also wanted to say that this piece is only to encourage and to be hopeful for the future.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs Jamar Roberts' "Members Don't Get Weary" Thursday, Thursday, February 22 and Saturday afternoon, February 24. The company's run is from February 22 through February 25 at the Adrienne Arsht Center in Miami.

Jamar Roberts is featured in the Ailey company's dance video inspired by the film, "[Moonlight](#)," which is set in Miami.

