

So You Think You Can't Dance? The Alvin Ailey Company Has Other Ideas

By: Louise Kennedy

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In my head, I am a lovely dancer: graceful, elegant, deeply attuned to the music. My feet, however, tend to disagree.

I was reminded of this tragic reality during a recent workshop with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. The company is back in town celebrating the 50th anniversary of its first performance in Boston, and a key part of that celebration was to offer two community workshops last month. The opportunity was irresistible: Join scores of other people, some trained dancers and some not, to learn some of the movements from the Ailey company's most famous piece, "Revelations."



Dance like an Ailey dancer! How could I say no?

So there I was, on a lovely Saturday afternoon, in Dorchester's Salvation Army Kroc Center Gym. With me was my 9-year-old daughter, TT, who can already dance circles around me -- as I was about to find out.

After a lively performance by the St. Paul AME Church choir, Nasha Thomas, a former Ailey dancer and current master teacher, invited us all down from the bleachers to the gym floor. More than 100 dancers walked down, leaving an assortment of parents, grandparents, friends and siblings to watch.

As Thomas introduced fellow teacher Cheryl Rowley-Gaskins and started to explain what we'd be doing, I glanced around at my fellow dancers, a little nervous to see quite a few professional-looking leotards and footless tights. (That's what they're called, right?) My own outfit I'd cobbled together in a mild panic that morning, with a sports bra that's older than TT, some stretched-out leggings and a tank top I picked entirely on the basis of its long, asset-concealing tail.

It was gratifying, however, to see a few bodies that looked more like mine — and, even better, to see people of all ages and many skin tones coming together for this experience. One of the depressingly unchanging realities of life in Boston is how racially segregated we remain, in the arts as everywhere else, and I'm always grateful for moments that break that pattern. This was one of them.

It was also, once we started moving, at once exhilarating and humbling. Oh, I did fine with the first few warmup exercises: stretching, reaching, wriggling, even striking a random pose on cue. (That last one was easy; I just did what I always do on the dance floor, which is to come up with the most ridiculous move I can think of in hopes that people will mistake any clumsiness for brilliant self-parody.)



And even the first few moments of the first dance felt just fine. Bow your head, then raise it, back, back, back, as your arms come up. I can do it! I'm dancing "Revelations"! Well, part of it, anyway: the beginning of the solemn, sorrowful movement, "I Been 'Buked," that opens the first of the piece's three sections.

But once we moved on to the second piece, "Wade in the Water," my newfound confidence took a hit. First you walk forward, slowly, hands clasped. No problem. But then comes this move that apparently involves joints and ligaments I simply don't possess — or, if I do, I have ignored them for so many years that they were not about to pay attention to me just because I asked.

I sneaked a look around. In unison, a hundred pelvises thrust forward, then back, in a single fluid motion, one apparently so simple that even a child could do it. My child! There she was, intently focused and moving right along with the crowd, as I jerked my hips along in a pathetically failed attempt to follow her lead.

Oh well. On to the next. Very exciting: We'd been given fans at the start of the day, and now we were going to get to use them, for the rousing "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham." I love this song! I can do this dance! I can ... oh. I can do the first bit.



A little fanning, a little stepping – but then comes the moment that, I realize in a flash, I have been dreading since I first signed up for this workshop: As I confidently twirl around to my left, every single other dancer is twirling to the right.

Oh, the embarrassment. The shame. The horror. Except that no one is looking at me. Everyone is focused on the dance.

And finally, finally, I get it.

It's not about whether I'm doing it perfectly; it's about doing it the best I can, with my whole self, in a sea of people all doing their best, with their whole selves. It's not a test. It's a dance.

And what a dance. I shrug off my anxiety, my disappointment with my aging and awkward body, my incessant and irritating self-consciousness, and I hear the music, and I dance. Oh, I dance. You should have seen me.

Well, actually, it's probably best that you didn't. But you should definitely see "Revelations."

Even if you've seen it before — and you may well have, since the Ailey company says it's the most-performed modern dance in the world. It will be performed again, Thursday through Sunday, at the Boch Center Wang Theatre, along with other works old and new, including the Boston premiere of "Victoria" on Friday and Saturday nights, and a new production of "The Golden Section" on Thursday and Sunday.



Those performances are presented by Celebrity Series, the Boston institution that first brought Ailey to Boston a half-century ago. Ailey, and his "Revelations," are part of the city's history now — and worth making part of your own history as well.

As we were leaving the gym, still exhilarated from the dance, I asked TT what she thought.

"It was different from what I expected," she said, "but I liked it."

Me too.