

# ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

## **REVELATIONS** (World Premiere – 1960)

*Choreography:* Alvin Ailey

*Music:* Traditional

*Décor and Costumes:* Ves Harper

*Costumes for "Rocka My Soul" redesigned by:* Barbara Forbes

*Lighting Design:* Nicola Cernovitch



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*. Photo by Paul Kolnik.

Since its creation in 1960, *Revelations* has consistently enraptured audiences all over the world with its perfect blend of reverent grace and spiritual elation. **Alvin Ailey's** signature masterpiece pays homage to and reflects the cultural heritage of the African-American, which Ailey considered one of America's richest treasures – "sometimes sorrowful, sometimes jubilant, but always hopeful." Choreographed when he was only 29 years old, *Revelations* is an intimate reflection inspired by childhood memories of attending services at Mount Olive Baptist Church in Texas, and by the work of writers James Baldwin and Langston Hughes. Set to a suite of traditional spirituals, *Revelations* explores the emotional spectrum of the human condition, from the deepest of grief to the holiest joy. A classic tribute to the resolve and determination of a people, the ballet has been seen by more people around the world than any other modern work.

Of its creation, Ailey once recalled: "I did it chronologically, leading off with the opening part of *Revelations*, which was...about trying to get up out of the ground. The costumes and the set would be colored brown, an earth color, for coming out of the earth, for going into the earth. The second part was something that was very close to me – the baptismal, the purification rite. Its colors would be white and pale blue. Then there would be the section surrounding the gospel church, the holy rollers and all the church happiness. Its colors would be earth tones, yellow and black."

The ballet premiered at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street YM-YWHA on January 31, 1960, and has since been performed a countless number of times all over the world. It was part of Opening Ceremonies of the 1968 Olympics, and has been presented at the White House on numerous occasions, including at the inaugurations of Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. The piece has had many film and television broadcasts, its first, the 1962 CBS special *Lamp Under my Feet*. It is also the framework for *Revelations: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, a residency program that has been implemented in public schools around the country, and uses Ailey's signature work as an organizing theme for a comprehensive, in-depth study of language arts, social studies and dance.



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*. Photo by Paul Kolnik.

Alvin Ailey combined Horton technique with his own astounding choreographic vision to create a series of movement that intertwines impossible strength and ethereal grace. After five decades, this American classic has proven to be a cultural landmark in the world of dance, maintaining its astonishing originality and powerful elegance while continuing to inspire and enthrall audiences everywhere.

## ALVIN AILEY ON REVELATIONS

**“This suite explores...emotions of African American religious music which, like its heir, the Blues, takes many forms – ‘true spirituals’ with their sustained melodies, ring shouts, song-sermons, gospel songs, and holy blues – [all] songs of trouble, love and deliverance.” -- Alvin Ailey, written for the premiere of *Revelations* on January 31, 1960, at the Kaufmann Concert Hall, 92<sup>nd</sup> Street YM-YWHA.**

According to Alvin Ailey, *Revelations* began with the music. It is infused with what he called “blood memories” – memories of his Texas youth, growing up with the sounds of spirituals and gospel music, which he remembered being filled with “profound feeling, with faith, hope, joy and sometimes sadness.” He recalled, “The choirs, congregations, deacons, preachers and ushers would sing black spirituals and gospel songs. They sang and played the music with such fervor that even as a small child I could not only hear it but almost see it. I remember hearing *Wade in the Water* being sung during baptism and hearing the pastor’s wife sing *I’ve Been Boked, I’ve Been Scorned* one Sunday during testifying time. I tried to put all of that feeling into *Revelations*.”

“I’m not afraid to say there is not one song in *Revelations* that doesn’t hold the listener’s interest. The songs are poetic, and the rhythm that grows out of them is Black rhythm. The songs are truthful and a real coming together of music and ideas through dance. The songs also represent a coming together of things in my head – of youth energy and enthusiasm, of my concern about projecting the Black image properly. They reflect my own feelings about being pressed into the ground of Texas, they re-create the music I heard from ladies in Texas who sold apples while singing spirituals, memories of my mother humming around the house, and the songs I sang in junior high school. We would sing *Rocka My Soul* in my junior high glee club. The songs in *Revelations* are all of those things. And I think they have meant a lot to audiences everywhere.” – Alvin Ailey

### **REVELATIONS**

#### **PILGRIM OF SORROW**

“The first [section] was called ‘Pilgrim of Sorrow.’ I took all of the songs dealing with black people’s sorrow and put them in this section; at the time there were about five or six songs. It was about trying to get up out of the ground. The costumes and the set would be colored brown, an earth color, for coming out of the earth, for going into the earth.” – Alvin Ailey

**I Been 'Boked;** Music arranged by Hall Johnson\*

**Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel;** Music arranged by James Miller+

**Fix Me, Jesus;** Music arranged by Hall Johnson\*

#### **TAKE ME TO THE WATER**

“The second part was something that was very close to me – the baptismal, the purification rite. Its colors would be white and pale blue. The middle section was to be ‘Wading in the Water.’ Songs such as ‘Honor, Honor’ had all of these extraordinary words. I was moved by what spirituals say as words, as metaphors. So I found these short songs for the middle section.” – Alvin Ailey

**Processional/Honor, Honor;** Music adapted and arranged by Howard A. Roberts

**Wade in the Water;** Music adapted and arranged by Howard A. Roberts. “Wade in the Water” sequence by Ella Jenkins. “A Man Went Down to the River” is an original composition by Ella Jenkins.

**I Wanna Be Ready;** Music arranged by James Miller

#### **MOVE, MEMBERS, MOVE**

“Then there would be the section surrounding the gospel church, the holy rollers and all the church happiness. Its colors would be earth tones, yellow and black. There were quite a few songs for the last section, ‘Move Members, Move.’ The whole ballet was a giant suite of spirituals. I poured in just about everything, every beautiful spiritual I had ever heard.” – Alvin Ailey

**Sinner Man;** Music adapted and arranged by Howard A. Roberts

**The Day is Past and Gone;** Music arranged by Howard A. Roberts and Brother John Sellers

**You May Run On;** Music arranged by Howard A. Roberts and Brother John Sellers

**Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham;** Music adapted and arranged by Howard A. Roberts

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**All performances of *Revelations* are permanently endowed by a generous gift from Donald L. Jonas in celebration of the birthday of his wife Barbara and her deep commitment to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.**

## What the Critics and Celebrities are saying about *Revelations*:

**"...It was a ravishment. Nothing prepares you for the totality of Alvin Ailey: the aural, visual, physical, spiritual beauty."**

Zadie Smith for *The New York Times*

**"I think that every American owes it to him and herself to see the Alvin Ailey troupe perform *Revelations*. It is an American phenomenon. You know, It's like Norman Rockwell – and then there's Alvin Ailey. I've probably seen it countless times and every time it's magical, spiritual and hopeful – everything that we want ourselves to be and hope that our country will be. So, it was an extraordinary evening to be able to see that. I can't even believe bodies do that."**

Oprah Winfrey

**"I saw Alvin Ailey when he first came to New York with his company and performed at the Y on 92nd Street. He did that incredible piece that he has been marked with ever since... *Revelations*. That was the first time I saw him."**

Cicely Tyson

**"...nothing will ever take the place of "*Revelations*," which more than a signature work is the very core of the company's identity"**

*Associated Press*

**"*Revelations*," the masterpiece foundation of the whole enterprise and a visceral reminder of what the company encapsulates and why people keep coming back for it."**

*The New York Times*

**"*Revelations*" (1960), continues to be an evergreen masterpiece that never seems to age, reliably sending the audience out into the cold stoked by a glowing ember of hope."**

*The Boston Globe*

**"*Revelations*," the company's closer that guarantees a standing ovation, as its gospel score and images of strength and fellowship build to a roar that engulfs you and lifts you, no matter how many times you've seen it. Each piece on the Ailey company's opening program at the Kennedy Center Opera House had this effect."**

*The Washington Post*

**"...Technically demanding, choreographically sound and aesthetically magnificent... It's the closest we get in dance to a permanent exhibit. In a word, it's a classic."**

*Chicago Tribune*

**"...perennially popular and consistently stirring, [the] 1960 suite of dances to African-American spirituals that has eager audiences crooning along with its opening strains of "I Been 'Buked" and clapping in rhythm to its rousing finale, "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham."**

*The Wall Street Journal*

**"In *Revelations*...the dancers know exactly who they are, and it shows in the exuberant detail of their body language. Not only does the piece not date, it makes the spirituals of the score seem universal."**

*The Boston Globe*

**"Audiences' enduring 'love affair' with Alvin Ailey's 'Revelations'. "It's pretty clear that there's a love affair between audiences and 'Revelations,'" choreographer Alvin Ailey wrote in his autobiography, speaking of the work that would become the signature of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. He was not overstating the case. Set to traditional African American spirituals that lend it historical, cultural and religious meaning — and that trace a dramatic journey from sorrow and longing to joy — "*Revelations*" has proved endlessly popular since its premiere in 1960."**

*The Washington Post*

**"...the Ailey gift that somehow keeps on giving."**

*The New York Times*

“...jubilant and moving gospel-based crowd thriller—it can still thrill me after scores of viewings; audiences start clapping before it’s even begun.”

*The New York Observer*

“... the Ailey dancers perform it with such complete, unbridled commitment every single time...baring their souls and giving their all to the piece’s roller coaster of emotions...A piece that’s an anthem to the human spirit needs 100 percent of the performers’ humanity and spirit. Last night, as always, the Ailey dancers brought it...dancers’ torsos rippled as smoothly as a river during a Southern baptism, I was right there with them, ready for the healing, ready to move forward...I had a hard time sitting still. I wanted to dance. I wanted to thank the dancers onstage for giving so much of themselves.”

*Dance Magazine*

“Ailey’s tribute to the African-American Spirit, set to gospel music, takes audience members through the gamut of human emotion—from the soulful duet *Fix Me, Jesus* to the joyous finale, *Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham*.”

*DanceTeacher Magazine* (5 Historic Dance Works To Be Thankful For)

### Revelations in the Press:



[ABC – Good Morning America, 3<sup>rd</sup> Hour](#): Robert Battle discusses the company’s pandemic pivot and debuts new film, ‘Wade in the Water’, 2020.

[Dance Magazine](#): The Magic of Revelations, 2017.

[ELLE.com](#): “Alvin Ailey Perform Revelations in Celebration of Black History Month”, 2018.



[NBC – TODAY Show](#): See Alvin Ailey dancers perform ‘Revelations’ live, 2019.

[NPR’s Here & Now](#): Celebrating ‘Revelations’ In These Times, 2020.

[TED Talk](#): Revelations from a Lifetime in Dance, 2019.



[The New York Times](#): Realigning for a Eurythmic Convergence, 2020.

[The New York Times - #SpeakingInDance](#): In ‘Sinner Man’ Your Soul Is Onstage, 2017.

[The New York Times](#): Moving the Spirit: Celebrating ‘Revelations’ at 50, 2010.

[The Washington Post](#): Audiences enduring ‘love affair’ with Alvin Ailey’s ‘Revelations’, 2016.

[The Washington Post](#): ‘Revelations’ still a revelation, 2008.

[Town & Country](#): Amazing Grace – Still, We Dance: An Ode to the Deliverance and Joy of Self-Expression, 2020.

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