Amazing Grace – Still, We Dance: An Ode to the Deliverance and Joy of Self-Expression

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AMAZING GRACE

STILL, WE DANCE: AN ODE TO THE DELIVERANCE AND JOY OF SELF-EXPRESSON.

BY KIWE CHASE-MARSHALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANA SCHRUDIS STYLED BY MARYKATE BOYLAN
very year, in theatre and concert halls around the globe, the Alvin Alley American Dance Theater takes audiences to church. Not just any house of worship, but the working-class, Black, Southern temples of rural Texas. The gospel they see and feel is Revolution, the company’s signature dance, which has been staged more often than the troupes’ other celebrated works, for some 25 million fans.

This year Revolution turns 60, and it has lost none of its incantatory power. Against the backdrop of both a global pandemic that disproportionately targets communities of color and the urgency of social justice movements including Black Lives Matter, Alley’s valentines to the epiphanies of its youth is its own call to action, an ode to the deliverance of self-expression in the face of adversity.

Alley’s dance language is scintillating and visceral, and his choreography has given generations of Black dancers a world of complex movement and emotion to inhabit,” the critic Margo Jefferson. As a young woman Debbie Allen saw Revolution, and it was a watershed moment. “I was the permission I needed to throw away my pointe shoes and kickball-change to that which I could really express,” the critic. Decades later Khalil Campbell, 27—who appears in this story alongside Alley colleagues Samantha Figgins, 31, and James Gilmer, 27—and also interviewed. There were people on the stage who looked like me,” Campbell recalls of the performances she saw as a student. “I was able to experience what my ancestors went through, and it was able to see it through movement.”

“That sense of history’s long arc is not just an element of Revolution, it is woven into the fabric of a company born out of the civil rights movement to offer hope, strength, and the balm of beauty. Alley was 29 when he choreographed the piece, and he intended it as a tribute to an elder, his mother, and the music they listened to at Mount Olive Baptist Church during the Depression, and also to his spiritual forbear, the writers James Baldwin and James Baldwin. Alley was also inspired by the range of talents around him in the late ’50s and early ’60s, such as the gospel singer Brother John Hamilton.

“Everybody was in bloom then,” recalls the great dancer Carmen de Lavallade, who had been Alley’s friend since middle school and was his lead partner in Revolution, which was first staged at the 92nd Street Y.

Two years later they were on the road, traveling through Australia and South Asia, and they would begin to cement their reputation as one of the marquee acts of an extremely exclusive club that trained movement’s dynamic capacity for storytelling. The current of Revolution alumna reads like a who’s who of contemporary dance greats: Donna Wood, Sylvia Waters, the late Miguel Gutierrez, and Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson, the founders of the elite dance company Complexions Contemporary Ballet. Alley artistic director emeritus Judith Jamison says they all brought something new to their roles as well as their successors, and in that, there is a message. “We have been and continue to be triumphant,” she says. “We have many more bridges to cross, and we will cross them.”

When a younger dancer like Campbell performs the rippling Yamadium tones undulations of the umbrella woman role made famous by Jamison, she knows she’s not just taking up a part, she’s inhabiting an emblem. Campbell’s long-legged atheletism and richly hued mahogany skin evoke Jamison’s impossibly long lines, and the younger dancer relishes carrying that torch, and the responsibility of presenting Black audiences with the affirming experience of beholding Black performers. “As a Black woman living in America, I was able to relate. Revolution talks about how we carry these burdens, but there is still hope, and that’s what allows us to proceed,” she says.

Like every major arts organization, Alley was ruled by the coronavirus crisis, forced to cut short its season and instead broadcast repertory works and a new piece online, on social media and its Alley TV Access free streaming platform. Its annual season at New York City Center, where its book-knotted board would have had pride of place this December, is on hold as of press time out of concern for the safety of both audience and performers. Dancers, though, are its underdogs, and Alley’s turned their cramped apartments and sprawling yards into makeshift stages to record performances for YouTube. They are joyous and defiant and ultimately liberating, an echo of resilience that runs through Revolution and much of the Alley oeuvre. “Dancers don’t do this because it’s their job,” says artistic director Robert Battle. “They do it because it’s their passion; it’s the essence of who they are. So they will be creative, and we will be creative, and we will make it through this.”

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