

A modern response to 'Revelations'

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DANCE



NICOLE TINTLE/ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

Rain interrupted Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's outdoor shoot of its new dance film, "Testament," a companion piece to the Ailey classic "Revelations" for its 60th anniversary.

BY CELIA WREN

A modern response to 'Revelations'

Alvin Ailey dance troupe creates 'Testament,' an homage to the beloved 1960 work

As if Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater didn't have enough to deal with while creating a high-profile new work during a pandemic, there was the weather. Rain scuttled much of an outdoor shoot for its new dance film, "Testament"—a contemporary response to the company's signature piece, "Revelations."

When the precipitation finally abated, Associate Artistic Director Matthew Rushing recalls wearily, "the lawn that we were dancing on was soaking wet, so the dancers' feet got wet. And it was cold and chilly. It was challenging after challenge."

Still, he adds, "I'm hoping that something beautiful comes out of that."

Audiences will have a chance to see that beauty during the company's first virtual season—now streaming online through Dec. 31. The lineup includes the Dec. 17 debut of "Testament," which Rushing created with company member Clifton Brown and former company member Yusha-Marie Sorzano. Also scheduled is the premiere of resident choreographer Jamar Roberts's "A Jam Session for Troubling Times," inspired by jazz great Charlie Parker, and "Ailey & Ellington," a showcase of ballets Ailey set to scores by Duke Ellington. But since 2020 is the 60th anniversary of "Revelations," that masterpiece is the season's recurring refrain, with learn-the-movement workshops,

archived recordings and more. All of the season's offerings will be available free online for one week each.

"We decided to look at the possibilities, as opposed to what isn't possible," Robert Battle, artistic director, says. Not that negatives haven't been clear in 2020. After the coronavirus hit in the spring, the New York-based company was forced to suspend live performances. (The company's annual Kennedy Center stop, originally scheduled for February 2021, will shift to June 2021.) To offset a revenue drop, the company took steps that including furloughing 16 full-time, non-dancer staff members (most of whom returned to work this fall) and instituting salary cuts.

The pandemic, Battle says, has "had a harsh impact financially on the company. Not one that is not survivable. We have always been very disciplined around our finances and making sure that we have an endowment for a rainy day. So, here's that rainy day!"

The company shifted its presence into cyberspace, with online content that, the company estimates, has reached more than 10 million people in 121 countries. The troupe uploaded archived filmed performances, but also generated such new pieces as

"Dancer Diaries," short movement-stepped films devised by the performers, and a #TheShowMustGoOn series, which included digitally fused footage of dancers in separate locales rollicking through repertoire, as if together.

Meanwhile, Rushing and his colleagues moved ahead with "Testament," which had been envisaged, pre-pandemic, as a live homage to "Revelations," a beloved Ailey work that arcs dramatically from grief and yearning to joy, against the backdrop of African American spirituals. Rushing, who has performed every male role in "Revelations," thought that multiple creative voices would add richness to the tribute, so he partnered with Brown and Sorzano. Collaboration was underway when the virus struck, forcing a pivot to a screen format. "We didn't want to create a ballet that we would film," Rushing says. "We really wanted to create a dance film."

That aligned with the company's efforts to bolster production values for its online offerings, following the year's early experiments. "When we started out, everybody was in their living room and their dogs were running around," Battle says. "Now we're trying to up that."

Cinematographer Preston Mil-

ler, an alum of an Ailey/Fordham BFA program, also worked on "Testament," which features an original score by Damien Sneed.

In the midst of planning "Testament," the death of George Floyd and subsequent activism for social justice prompted further recalibration. "There was no way we could continue on as usual," Rushing says. The idea of protest became a theme in the film, which also explores concepts such as Afrofuturism. Throughout the process, Rushing says, the focus was on refracting the essence, not the specifics, of the 1960 classic.

"We decided to stay away from quoting or doing any kind of movement that may be popular or well known from 'Revelations,'" he says. "We saw that as a way of respecting the work."

Central to the essence of "Revelations" are its spirituals, a genre often infused with sorrow or longing. Rushing says his team decided to imbue "Testament" with a 2020 equivalent: "the reflections and feelings of the dancers, who are now going through some troubling times, [turned] into our own personal spirituals."

For example, a whirling, reaching solo by Samantha Figgins drew on her journal entries

about resilience and overcoming self-doubt. A D.C. native, Figgins had seen some upsides to lockdown life. Sure, her cozy Harlem apartment had just barely enough space for her to practice—

if she moved her couch. But with the sudden abundance of online content, she was able to take classes in different dance traditions, such as the Martha Graham technique. And the dancer used some of her off time to study American Sign Language, connecting with one aspect of her identity (she has single-sided deafness). In her "Testament" solo, she incorporates an ASL soliloquy based on her journaling. The company, she says, gives dancers "space to bring their whole self into the room."

As the virtual season approached, everyone had to get back into shape. In April, the company had shipped vinyl dance mats to make dancers' homes more practice friendly. In mid-September, reentry to the troupe's Manhattan building began, as did a five-week conditioning program the dancers participated in virtually or in person. Among the safety measures during conditioning and rehearsals, dancers wore masks, stayed in cohorts and checked in on a

health app. To ensure distancing, stage managers used tape to divvy the studio floors into boxes, each large enough for a dancer.

Safety considerations even necessitated adjustments to "Revelations" when it was filmed in the fall at the Ailey Citigroup Theater and outdoors at Wave Hill, a public garden and cultural center in the Bronx. In this "Revelations" iteration, performers were farther apart than in recent years, and, Battle says, "the dancers really don't do any partnering. So that's been interesting." He was cheered when he came across a video of "Revelations" from when Ailey himself was still dancing—the choreographer died in 1989—and noticed more space between dancers. "We thought, 'Oh! This is justifiable,'" Battle says.

As with the tweaked "Revelations," the 19-dancer "Testament" was shot partly outdoors at Wave Hill, with the dancers removing their masks for the filming itself. Yes, it was cold, but once the dancing started, Figgins says, "that energy warms you up!"

And the pandemic has reinforced her belief in the art form's invincibility. "Dance—your home is your body," she says. "So wherever you are, you have access to that feeling and that calling. Dance cannot be contained."

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Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's virtual season runs through Dec. 31. Free to stream at alvinaley.org/virtualseason.