

# San Francisco Chronicle

## DATEBOOK

### Review: Power of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's virtual return to Berkeley rivals a live performance

By: Rachel Howard

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Eavesdrop pre-curtain at Bay Area dance shows and you'll hear audience members sharing their top dance memories. High on almost everyone's list? Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at UC Berkeley.

The company first visited the campus in 1960, two years after its founding, and has come back every year since. And neither Artistic Director Robert Battle nor Cal Performances' leader Jeremy Geffen were about to let that Bay Area bond lapse in a pandemic, so the dancers have returned virtually in a streaming program that does an astonishing job of relaying their in-person power. The performance premieres Thursday, June 10, with a digital "watch party," and will be available for streaming through Sept. 8.

As Judith Jamison says in an archival interview intercut with performance footage for this program, "Cry" — the 1971 solo Alvin Ailey created to honor his mother and Black women everywhere — "is about the dancer and the dance but the dance holds up ... 'Cry' is just this work of art that needs to be seen forever and ever and ever." That's true also for Ailey's 1960s dance "Revelations," and both classics are presented smartly for this pandemic moment.



But the company is also constantly creating, and the lead offering here is an ambitious 25-minute world premiere, commissioned by Cal Performances, by Ailey's resident choreographer Jamar Roberts.



"Holding Space" was made for camera but looks like it would adapt powerfully to the live stage. What strikes you immediately is Roberts' gift for commanding the total stage picture. A grid of blue lights blasts through a field of 12 silhouetted dancers, their shadowed bodies limned by the faint outline of translucent shirts and pants (Roberts created the scenic design and costumes). They look like bodies trapped in individual bubbles, which is something all of us can feel viscerally right now. The aural landscape — five works by Canadian sound artist Tim Hecker — is overwhelming and futuristic, yet terrifyingly beautiful.

Ghrai DeVore-Stokes breaks into the first solo, tracing the edge of the stage, her movements alternately frenzied and robotic, powered as all the movement is in the program by that unshakable strength of the Ailey-trained core. The metaphoric ideas that follow are powerfully simple. Mid-dance, the rolling metal frame of a cube appears, entrapping dancers for solos. What makes the dance entrancing is the texture of the movement — much of it built upon an elegant balletic crouch, the wide fourth position of the feet — and a subtle difference in emotional tenor between each solo. Miranda Quinn especially ratchets up the tension when she steps in, but each dancer is beguiling in a different way. "Holding Space" is tense but be advised that a blessed release is coming.

The 50th-anniversary tribute to "Cry" that follows mixes performances by Jamison and current Ailey member Constance Stamatiou, shrewdly giving us both dance and documentary.

"Revelations Reimagined," produced last year, begins with shots of Ailey dancers processing through Wave Hill Public Garden in the Bronx, then juxtaposes a 1962 TV performance with fresh dancing recorded in the Ailey Citigroup Theater in Manhattan.



The final section, "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham," is recorded in a church-like hall and deftly edited to be nearly as stirring as the live experience. The disappointment comes only when you miss the raucous live ovation and realize that, on a screen, there will be no encores. We will just have to demand more of those when Ailey dancers come back, in the flesh, next year. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's world premiere of "Holding Space": Also featuring excerpts from "Cry," and "Revelations Reimagined." Watch party 7 p.m. Thursday, June 10. The program is available to stream through Sept. 8. \$15-\$60. 510-642-9988. [www.calperformances.org](http://www.calperformances.org)