Review: Classic ‘Revelations’ feeds the soul as Alvin Ailey company returns to Cal Performances

By: Rachel Howard
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‘Revelations’ feeds the soul

Alvin Ailey dance troupe offers a stellar performance of its namesake’s 1960 work

By Rachel Howard

Alvin Ailey’s “Revelations” is back in the flesh — and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is dancing it as rivetingly as ever.

If you’ve never seen “Revelations,” or haven’t gotten a dose in a few years, make haste to the Ailey company’s current run at UC Berkeley’s Cal Performances, where this eternal and indescribable 1960 classic is slated to cap every program there are five of them on offer through Sunday, April 3. And brace yourself, as one longtime fan was heard telling a newcomer on opening night Thursday, March 29, “You’re about to go to church.”

That was especially true with Sarah Hooker, performing equal parts physical strength and emotional vulnerability in “fix Me, Jesus,” and James Gilmer, Chalvar Monteiro and Kerri Seymour racing like hurricanes through “Sinner Man.” Yet, the whole audience dopped along with “Rock My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham.” And, yes, there was an encore.

But plenty more noted celebration as the Ailey troupe took the Zellerbach Hall stage for the first time since its last pre-pandemic visit in 2019, continuing a 54-year relationship with Cal Performances that dates back almost to the company’s founding in 1958. As Artistic Director Robert Battle told the jubilant crowd, “The last few years made us acutely aware of the fragility of life, and the fragility of democracy. … I believe we should revel in this moment because of it all and in spite of it all.”

And Battle had a personal milestone to reveal in the 10th anniversary of his appointment to helm the company. To mark this, opening night offered seven full works or excerpts from Battle’s erratic — “like a buffet, except you have to eat everything,” he quipped. Happily, this was a varied and satisfying meal with plenty of flavor in the side dishes.

The work, set to Duke Ellington’s “Four,” set a quartet of the company’s most vibrant — and fear-dancing — personalities loose to some really kicking trum-
Star performance by Ailey troupe

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kneepads in rehearsal—every dance involved regularly flinging one’s joints to the floor and rising as though nothing had happened.

But, more important, the dances look tailor-made to Ailey. Someone never to seeing the troupe might never guess that fewer than half of these dances by Battle were made on the company, and only one was made since Battle became artistic director. The Ailey troupe is what’s known as a “repertory company,” dedicated to offering a variety of new choreography alongside the classics Ailey himself bequeathed it. This means that Battle has focused on acquiring work by other choreographers—like the hip-hop grounded Rennie Harris and the theatrically brilliant Aszure Barton, who will be featured on other programs in this run—over continuing the choreography career he had built as founder of his own company, Battleworks.

Seeing Battle’s work en masse, you both appreciate his distinguished choreography gifts and appreciate all the more how patiently he shelved them in order to serve the greater needs of this massive institution, whose ultimate strength is its dancers. Dance companies, like great works of art, don’t really have eternal life. But under Battle, it feels that way with Ailey.

Robert Battle has spent 10 years leading the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

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