Alvin Ailey’s ‘Survivors’ a tribute to Mandela

By Cynthia Perry

February 12, 2023 (Online: 2/6/23)

Alvin Ailey’s ‘Survivors’ a tribute to Mandela

Dance about speaking against the taking away of a human’s rights.

By Cynthia Perry

For the AJC

Robert Battle was four years into his artistic directorship of the Alvin Alley American Dance Theater and still he sometimes questioned whether or not he belonged there. Former Alley artistic director Judith Jamison had handpicked Battle to succeed her, but he hadn’t known Alvin Alley and had never danced with his company. Then something occurred during the company’s 2015 tour of South Africa that changed all that.

The company performed and taught dance classes in cities and townships across the country. They visited the Robben Island prison cell that restrained Nelson Mandela for 18 years of his 27-year imprisonment for opposing apartheid, the South African government’s brutally enforced
Choreographed by Alley and Mary Barnett, "Survivors" is a tribute to the courage and suffering of Nelson and Winnie Mandela in their struggle against apartheid. It will be performed Feb. 16-19 at the Fox Theatre in Atlanta. Photo courtesy of Alvin Ailey.

Dance
continued from E3

system of segregation.

One evening at a reception in the U.S. ambassador's residence in Pretoria, John Kani, the South African actor, director, playwright and activist, approached Battle and embraced him.

In a deep, resonant African lilt, Kani told Battle: Four hundred years ago, I was your brother. We were on the beach. They came for us. They took you. They left me. Four hundred years later, you returned. You look the same.

In that moment, Battle felt a sense of belonging to a place, a people and a cause to fight social injustice. He felt close to Mandela. And that hit the spark that led to the writing of Alvin Alley's "Survivors," a tribute to the courage and suffering of Nelson and Winnie Mandela in their struggle against apartheid.

Choreographed in 1996 by Alley and Mary Barnett, "Survivors" is a part of the run at the Fox Theatre Feb. 16-19 that includes company premieres by Twyla Tharp and Alvin Alley, world premieres by Kyle Abraham and Jamar Roberts, plus repertory works by Alley and Battle.

Lot of people associate Alley with "Revelations," his 1986 masterpiece that closes most every Alley performance. "He's telling a hard truth about faith and hope over despair, but he does it in a way that is both profound, moving and elegant," said Battle.

By comparison, "Survivors" is riveting because Battle didn't smooth out the edges.

Battle recalled a 1988 excerpt from "Survivors" filmed in a dark, gritty prison cell. It showed a different time and place of Alley's voice, unlike the choreographer's popular, accessible works.

"I had this kind of lawsuit—trouble and anxiety and pain, and this is what I've always loved about Alley's work," Battle said. "It is deep and real and spiritual and political."