Seeking connection via Revelations

‘AMERICAN PHENOMENON’: Alvin Ailey’s dancers arrive in Vancouver for masterpiece show

On stage

Clifton Brown shares life in common with Alvin Ailey, the choreographer who was the milestone in African-American dance whose name he knows well. But beyond that, their backgrounds couldn’t be more different.

Brown grew up in the 30s in the South, where he was a black man and was a part of the incredible experience of growing up in the 50s in Arkansas.

There are whole lot of things that people from that time and community had to face that I didn’t,” says Brown.

But that’s the beauty of Ailey’s legacy. You needn’t have any knowledge of what it was like growing up black in southern Texas, about the two burdens of poverty and segregation, as Ailey did, to understand his expression of sorrow, joy and ultimately holding faith through difficult times.

“Dance came from the people and... it should always be delivered back to the people.” — The late Alvin Ailey

That was the truth that propelled Ailey and the modern dance company he founded half a century ago to stardom, astonishing critics with their technical prowess, but more importantly, their highly charged performances.

Created in 1958 with a group of young black dancers, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is widely credited for giving black people a voice at a racially hostile time when African-American stories weren’t being told.

Ailey, however, also fervently believed that “dance came from the people and that it should always be delivered back to the people,” a mantra that has allowed the company to transcend racial boundaries.

Today, few modern dance companies are revered as this one, both in the U.S. and abroad. Oprah Winfrey has called it an "American phenomenon." An Alvin Ailey doll was produced in celebration of the company’s 50th anniversary.

And Revelations, the masterpiece choreographed by Ailey in 1958, which will be performed in Vancouver for just three shows, is believed to have been seen by more people in the world than any other modern dance piece. Brown was just 13 years old the first time he watched a video of Revelations. He vaguely recalled Ailey’s name as a famous one, and being a young dancer himself, decided to check out the video from the library. Even as a boy, he was moved.

“I just connected with it. I think most people who see it feel that way and for me, it was on a level that was like a dancer yes, because I was a young dancer, but it was also very human,” says Brown.

“I think one of the reasons it’s a masterpiece is because it’s done in a way that’s accessible to everyone. It’s not saying these people are black and they’re beautiful. This is a dance that everyone can feel good about. It can come from anywhere. And that’s why Revelations is so great.”

Revelations is a three-part tapestry set to blues and spiritual music, rooted in Ailey’s “blood memories” of growing up in Texas.

Born in 1930, Ailey spent much of his youth at church with his mother, where he found a sanctuary singing black gospel songs. It’s this spiritual world that is recreated in Revelations, with references to prayer, baptism, and the Holy Ghost, in the last act “Rock That Soul!”

“I Just hope they enjoy it and feel a connection. And if it’s the first time they’ve seen a dance performance, I hope it opens their eyes to another world.” — Clifton Brown on his hopes for his company’s performance of Revelations

Brown has performed Revelations countless times (by his estimate, at least a dozen and times over a dozen years) yet it never gets old, he says, in part because it often changes roles, but also because the audience reaction is never the same.

“The feedback of their energy,” he says over the phone from Las Vegas.

Brown, 81, joined the company when he was just 19. Soft-spoken and modest, he’s been heralded as one of the company’s great dancers, called by critics a “star among stars.”

But it’s not accolades he’s after; just an opportunity to perform what Ailey taught all these years earlier.

“I just hope they enjoy it and feel a connection,” he says.

“And if it’s the first time they’ve seen a dance performance, I hope it opens their eyes to another world.” — Clifton Brown

Which makes it perhaps not all that different from his predecessors or the shows themselves.