

Masterpiece: 'Revelations' (1960) by Alvin Ailey The Ailey Company's Calling Card

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By ROBERT GRESKOVIC

A seemingly bemused Alvin Ailey (1931-1989) uttered a sonorously drawn out "No!" to Harry Belafonte in a 1978 television conversation with the singer, who asked the choreographer, "When you were making 'Revelations,' did you know you'd be doing it forever?" At that point, Mr. Ailey's wildly popular dance suite set to spirituals and gospel music was already 18 years old.

To Mr. Belafonte's follow-up question, "Does it bother you?"—referring to the continued strong demand for this particular work, which Mr. Ailey created in 1960 for a one-night showing at New York's YM-YWHA Dance Center and which he had followed by the late '70s with some 50 other dance works—Mr. Ailey said, still mostly smiling: "In a way it does. Isn't that strange?"

Mr. Ailey wasn't the first artist, nor will he be the last, to try to deflect the public's interest from an early, runaway hit in hopes of gaining attention for some later efforts. But, however much artists want to move along, individual works of art have their ways of demanding attention.

"When I made 'Revelations,'" Mr. Ailey told Mr. Belafonte, "I just wanted to make another dance," a work, he continued, "about these memories," which he said came from his often hard-scrabble upbringing in rural Texas. The result was a bitter and sweet display of what Mr. Ailey has called "holy blues, paeans to joy and an anthem to the human spirit." The dance's changing moods grow from inwardly earthbound, through clear-water aqueous, to blazingly bright, with flickers of flaming damnation in the background. And, as countless audiences nationally and internationally have learned while greeting the work with raising-the-rafters responses over the past half-century, "Revelations" is hardly just "another dance."

From its first outing with Mr. Ailey's then two-year-old company, when the three-part, 16-number work ran over an hour, to the current version in three parts with 10 numbers—settled on in 1964 at about half the original length—"Revelations" remains a high point of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater programs, where it usually acts as a closing work. To celebrate the 50th anniversary of its internationally recognized calling card, the Ailey company is offering "Revelations" 28 times over five weeks during its annual City Center season.

Last month, a panel moderated by retiring Ailey artistic director and former star dancer Judith Jamison was held to celebrate Mr. Ailey's creation. Among the observations aired were some veterans' opinions suggesting that today's dancers, while technically superior to previous generations, might be missing some of the "character" or personal depth that distinguished "Revelations" in the past.

Without getting the least bit defensive, Ms. Jamison, who followed Mr. Ailey as the company's head, voiced her view of keeping "Revelations" alive: "We validate the dance," she said, "by doing it excellently, but not exactly," implying her interest in room for today's dancers to make their own marks, their way.

The "it" in "Revelations" was mostly characterized on this occasion as the soul of the work's various, sometimes heavy emotions. Mr. Ailey himself had noted that the suite's first part, "Pilgrim of Sorrow," concerned "trying

to get up out of the ground"; its second, "Take Me to the Water," "the baptismal, the purification rite"; its third, "Move, Members, Move!," "all church happiness."

What wasn't discussed were the work's savvy formal elements, which I have long found key to its theatrical magic.

The choreographer told Mr. Belafonte that his fascination with dance was an interest in "movement as theater." Here, Mr. Ailey's keen choreographic craft finds inspired support from the visual designers involved with "Revelations."

All of Ves Harper's décor and costume choices possess distinctions of color and shape, no matter how elementally. Fishnet vests on the men are part hairshirt and part field-worker uniform; sackcloth dresses on the women are both work clothes and canny chemises. Nicola Cernovitch's lighting, mostly expansive washes of color with select, cut-out areas, suggest everything from sun-baked skies to a wall of hellfire.

Most notably, Mr. Ailey's artful arrangements of dancers in space, and his commanding way with musically inspired inventions for solos and groups, give his suite's sections their own voice and profile. Only one episode features a lone dancer on stage: "I Wanna Be Ready" showcases an athletic, white-clad male dancer whose mostly ground-hugging moves accent abdominal, veritably gut-wrenching accents and aching long, reaching limbs. "Wade in the Water," the second section's centerpiece, includes sun-kissed celebrants in an outdoor baptism and an umbrella-carrying woman in a frothy white dress. Ms. Jamison made this role her very own in the 1970s, floating her umbrella like a celestial canopy and using her liquid arms to tickle the waters suggested by bolts of blue fabric into rippling streams.

"I Been 'Buked" at the work's start and "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham" at the end both have strength-in-numbers effectiveness. The former presents the impregnable force of an intimate phalanx, one that breathtakingly sprouts bird-wing arms; the latter is a geometrically arrayed and gesture-filled presentation of joy-filled Sunday-dressed men and women who leave their earthly cares and harken to the call of gospel music and faith in God.

Ailey American Dance Theater's "Revelations" celebrations include special performances with a cast of 50, doubling the usual number of dancers. While this expansive arrangement has its charms in the form of beaming boys and girls from the Ailey School and of budding professional dancers from Ailey II, the company's junior ensemble, the added numbers don't necessarily add to Mr. Ailey's well-ordered plan.

If you've never seen "Revelations," it might be wisest to acquaint yourself with the longstanding version of this beautifully paced and shaped suite. Smaller in scale in this case does not mean smaller in impact.

—Mr. Greskovic writes about dance for the Journal.