



Ailey's 'Revelations' at 50: Still Awe-Inspiring

Alvin Ailey fetes 'Revelations,' its singular masterpiece, all season long

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Turning 50 is not always cause for outright celebration. Many of us are too depressed. And then that AARP card comes in the mail.

But a 50th birthday was truly an occasion for joy this week when the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater launched a season-long celebration of "Revelations," its masterpiece, first performed a half-century ago in a one-night show at Manhattan's 92nd St Y. And you could see that joy on the faces of the Ailey dancers — the ones who make sure it stays fresh, alive and the most beloved work of modern dance in the world.

Joy, perhaps mixed with a bit of nervousness. The piece is usually performed to taped music, but at Wednesday's City Center gala, its famous spirituals were performed live by Sweet Honey in the Rock, the Grammy-winning, all-female ensemble. The presence of live accompaniment was exciting and fresh, but also probably a bit unnerving for the dancers, especially at moments when the tempo or key seemed to waver from the norm.

Yet "Revelations" could be performed in a driving snowstorm and still transmit its power, beauty, cultural resonance and infectious energy. It was especially moving to see a new short film explaining the social context of the work — which chronicles the African-American experience through such songs as "I Been 'Buked," "Fix Me, Jesus," "Wade in the Water" and the joyous, rollicking "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham" — and showing Ailey himself dancing it, muscles rippling, his very intensity seeming to jump off the screen.

This Ailey season is important for another reason than the "Revelations" birthday: It is the last for Judith Jamison, the artistic director who took over after Ailey's death in 1989. This iconic dancer, who made her mark in Ailey's searing "Cry," was honored at the White House earlier this year and will be the subject of a final farewell show on Jan. 2. (After that, the "Revelations" birthday tour hits the heartland, covering 24 cities by late May.)

Wednesday's gala was also an opportunity to present Jamison's successor: choreographer Robert Battle, who promptly charmed the audience. Opinions were a bit more varied on "The Hunt," his own 2001 work that had its Ailey premiere.

A piece for six men, bare-chested and in long black skirts, it effectively showcased the athleticism of some of the company's most accomplished male dancers, including the wonderful Matthew Rushing. They leaped and turned to the rhythms of Les Tambous du Bronx, a French percussion group, and while their movements were absorbing, one wished they had built to something more climactic.

Still, it was a powerful display, and Rushing seemed not to miss a beat when his skirt came off mid-dance — a mild wardrobe malfunction that had Battle quipping later: "If anyone can dance his skirt off, it's Matthew Rushing."

The evening also honored Joan Weill, the chairwoman of the Ailey board who has both given and raised millions for the company over a decade. She was the first to stand and cheer "Revelations" at its conclusion, a gesture that the rest of the audience soon followed, and which crowds across the globe are sure to do for another 50 years, at least.

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PHOTO: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Glenn Allen Sims, left, and Linda Celeste Sims perform in Alvin Ailey's "Revelations," at New York's City Center. (AP Photo/ Christopher Duggan) (AP)