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Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

50 years of 'Revelations'

With a new artistic director, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is still spreading the gospel. **ES**

Living & Arts

At 50, a dance revelation

Ailey's masterwork is rooted in past, present, future.

Piece to conclude 5 shows at the Fox.

By **Howard Pousner**
hpousner@ajc.com

Robert Battle, who will succeed Judith Jamison as artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in July, says he's already been asked several times by reporters if, in applying his imprint, he'd consider taking the classic "Revelations" off the company's programs.

"I think, would anyone ever get on a stepladder and take the 'Mona Lisa' down and say, 'So many people have seen it, why bother?'" Battle allowed during a recent visit to Atlanta, where the internationally heralded troupe opens a five-performance visit Thursday.

Comparing the Ailey-choreographed "Revelations" to da Vinci's 16th century portrait, one of the most recognizable paintings in Western art history, might seem a stretch for a 50-year-old modern dance work. But, well, not that much.

For a half-century, "Revelations" has been considered an American cultural treasure, a church-stoked, spirituals-fired tribute to African-American faith and perseverance created by the then 29-year-old Ailey, just two years after he launched his celebrated dance company. Ailey created 79 ballets over his lifetime (he died in 1989, at 58, of a rare blood disease), but "Revelations" is unquestionably his sig-

nature work.

The dance, rooted in the Baptist church of Ailey's youth in segregated, small-town Texas, is included on most programs by the troupe. Given that the company has performed for an estimated 23 million people in 71 countries on six continents, that's a whole lot of "Wade in the Water" and "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham" — to name just two of the rapturous songs to which Ailey married movement — being spread around the globe.

The 32-minute dance has been performed at an Olympic opening ceremony (1968, Mexico City), an inaugural concert for President Jimmy Carter (1977, Kennedy Center), five times at the White House (most recently last year in a tribute to Jamison hosted by first lady Michelle Obama), during the Centennial Olympic Games Cultural Olympiad in Atlanta, and has been endorsed by Oprah Winfrey ("every American owes it to him and herself to see ... 'Revelations'") as well as produced a commemorative Barbie doll (designed by Jamison).

Ailey's 24-city North American tour celebrates the dance's 50th anniversary, and the audience favorite will conclude all five Fox Theatre programs, preceded by a short documentary film.

"There's this exchange that happens with 'Revelations' like no other ballet that I've seen where that fourth wall, or whatever is between the dancers and the audience, is obliterated. It just seems that we're all one," said Battle, the noted choreographer and Battleworks

Onstage

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater
Fox Theatre, 660 Peachtree St. N.E., Atlanta. Tickets, \$20-\$60 (plus varying ticket service fee). Saturday matinee deal: buy one, half off second ticket. 1-800-745-3000, www.alvinaley.org/atlanta, www.foxtheatre.org.

Performance schedule:

● **7:30 p.m. Thursday:** "Three Black Kings," "Cry," "The Hunt," "Revelations" film, "Revelations"

● **8 p.m. Friday:** "Anointed," "Forgotten Time," "Revelations" film, "Revelations"

● **2 p.m. Saturday:** "Three Black Kings," "Cry," "The Hunt," "Revelations" film, "Revelations"

● **8 p.m. Saturday:** "Anointed," "Forgotten Time," "Revelations" film, "Revelations"

● **3 p.m. Sunday:** "Three Black Kings," "Cry," "The Hunt," "Revelations" film, "Revelations"

Dance Company founder. "And I think ... that's why 50 years later the dance is still so important.

"Any masterwork is rooted in the past, present and future," Battle continued. "And that's what 'Revelations' is."

With that thought in mind, here's a bit of oral history from the dance's creator, the artistic director who helped spread its gospel, and the company's third artistic director who will carry it forward.

Robert Battle



Robert Battle

The artistic director designate first saw Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater perform "Revelations" as a teen with a Miami Northwestern Senior High School group, and he felt it helped focus his early interest in dance.

"My mother played piano for the church choir, and growing up in the church choir, and we also had a piano in the house and would sing some of these same songs," Battle said during his recent Atlanta visit. "But I had never seen a dance done to that music. So it really illuminated a whole other possibility of what dance could be. It was very, very, very important."

After the performance, Battle recounted, "I think most of us there felt, not

opportunities for African-Americans."

"It is important for a young person like myself, that we remember as dancers what we're doing," said Battle, 38. "That it is important because someone in that audience sees this and wants to be a better teacher, wants to be a better mother, wants to be a better husband. Whatever it is, 'Revelations' makes you want to do something great."

"Each generation has something new or different to add to it. We try to stay away from comparisons — the 'Oh, it's not the way it used to be.' Well, it shouldn't be the way it used to be! How could it survive the way it used to be? It can't be a box. It's a living, breathing work of art."

Alvin Ailey



Alvin Ailey

"'Revelations' began with the music," the choreographer wrote in "Revelations: The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey" (1995). "As early as I can remember I was enthralled by the music played and sung in the small black churches in every small town my mother and I lived in. No matter where we were during those nomadic years, Sunday was always a churchgoing day ..."

"With profound feeling, with faith, hope, joy, and sometimes sadness, the choirs, congregations, deacons, preachers and ushers would sing black spirituals and gospel songs. They sang and played the music with such fervor that even as a

small child I could not only hear it, but almost see it. I remember hearing 'Wade in the Water' being sung during baptism and hearing the pastor's wife sing 'I Been 'Buked, I Been Scorned' one Sunday during testifying time. I tried to put all of that feeling into 'Revelations.' ..."

"I'm not afraid to say there is not one song in 'Revelations' that doesn't hold the listener's inter-

est. The songs are poetic, and the rhythm that grows out of them is black rhythm. The songs are truthful and a real coming together of music and ideas through dance. The songs also represent a coming together of many things in my head — of youthful energy and enthusiasm, of my concern about projecting the black image properly. They reflect my own feeling about being pressed into the ground of Texas; they re-create the music I heard from ladies in Texas who sold apples while singing spirituals, memories of songs my mother would hum around the house and the songs I sang in junior high school."

Judith Jamison



Judith Jamison

"It set a tone for what is human in all of us, no matter where you come from," Jamison said of the dance on Ailey's website. "We've done that piece all over the world, and everyone understands exactly what it's about — it's humanity, it's triumph, and what it is to be human."

She also recently told The New York Times: "It means the world to me to

have done that ballet. It's a classic work, and it will remain in my body."