



On Alvin Ailey: 'Tis The Season for Reminders

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By Nana Ekua Brew-Hammond

Every holiday season, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater takes Manhattan's City Center. For many New Yorkers, it's a ritual; an annual reminder the year is coming to a close, and that said year has been good enough that one can spare the ticket price for this cultural treat.

As with many rituals, it's easy to forget why it matters. But watching the company perform "From Before" offered a powerful reminder. New to the schedule this season, every leap, kick, swivel, and thrust remembered Africa, even as it directly invoked Tony and Olivier Award-winning choreographer Garth Fagan's West Indian heritage.



Fagan, who choreographed *The Lion King* musical on Broadway, acknowledged the piece's nod to "the fluidity of Caribbean dance, the polyrhythms of African, the precision of ballet and the strength and weight of modern dance."

"'From Before' was looking back at my origins in the West Indies and seeing how I could take away all the trimmings and the costumes of African or Caribbean dance and strip it right down to the bare bones," is how Fagan explains this spectacle, on the Ailey website.

More than 50 years since the original Ailey performance that sparked the creation of the company, Alvin Ailey Dance Theater remains a vital preservative of Black culture. One of the only dance companies dedicated to celebrating African-American cultural expression through dance, an annual revisiting stirs up necessary questions like: why aren't there more dancers of color on the stage? A simple question, currently without a satisfactory answer.

Unrelated on the surface, yet connected like Fagan's fluid dancers, was BET's telecast of Alex Haley's *Roots*. The television miniseries which first debuted in American homes in January 1977 tracked the trials, tragedy, and triumph of a Black family enslaved in the antebellum south.

Starting with the kidnapping of a teenage boy from his native Gambia and ending with the first years of post-Civil War freedom, the series is among the top rated television events of all time, as it reminded the country of the brutal and shared history of slavery.

Nearly 36 years after its first airing, BET reintroduced the series to a new generation. As tweets and Facebook posts percolated across the web expressing shock and surprise by many of the first-time viewers, the power of the reminder hung heavy in the air.

It seems fitting that these reminders converge during this reflective season. Post-Sandy Hook, the entire nation has been forcibly reminded of the many lives lost in almost back to back shooting sprees--and forced us to ask some hard questions about gun control and our mental health system.

And with the holiday, Christians and Jews are reminded of the foundations of their faith, and they ask the necessary questions. What do Christmas and Hanukkah truly mean? To me? Amidst the carols and eggnog and Christmas parties, and dinners, we ask.

And we watch, dance, sing, mourn, and pray for the answers. And when the curtains close, the credits roll, the last candle lit, the tree ready to be put away, we start fresh. Hopefully, we've learned something.

"From Before" will be performed on December 26th at 7:30p and December 30th at 8pm. The Alvin Ailey Season at City Center closes on December 30th.