

KALAMAZOO SUNDAY GAZETTE

50 & proud: legendary Alvin Ailey dancers stop at Miller Auditorium for jubilee tour

Posted by Marin Heinritz | Special to the Kalamazoo Gazette February 08, 2009 07:33AM

As a kid growing up in working-class neighborhoods in Boston, Kirven J. Boyd loved to dance. But it wasn't until he got a free ticket through his high school to see an Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performance that he developed a singularity of purpose.



Kirven J. Boyd

"I had known and respected and loved other companies, but Ailey was where I aspired to dance," Boyd said in a telephone interview.

Seeing that show at 13 inspired him to audition for the Boston Arts Academy, a performing-arts high school. His teachers there told him: "If you get serious, this could happen for you," he said.

Boyd, 24, is now a principal dancer with the New York City-based Alvin Ailey, and he will perform on Feb. 10 at Miller Auditorium as part of the company's 50th anniversary tour.

Stories like Boyd's likely would have made Alvin Ailey, who died in 1989, proud. Born in 1931, Ailey founded the black modern-dance company in 1958, when "there wasn't a company around that was dealing with the African-American experience," Boyd said. "There wasn't anything around for African-Americans."

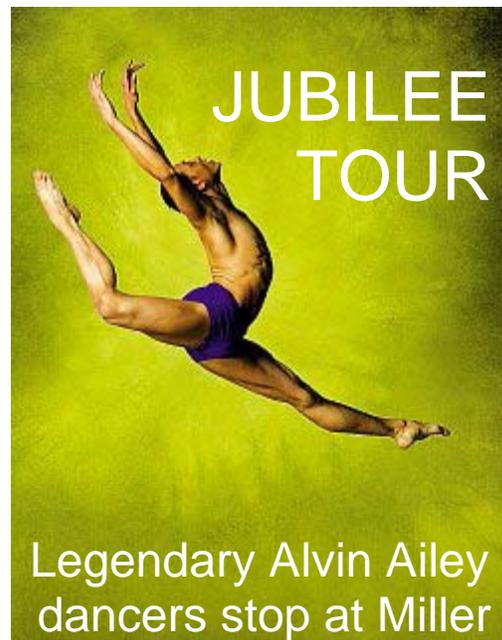
Ailey is credited with establishing a black modern-dance tradition. However, in 1963, he stopped hiring exclusively black dancers. He was criticized for the decision, but Ailey said his aim was to create more opportunities for black dancers, not to limit the possibilities for gifted dancers of all races.

"He always said he loved people, period. There are many roles that are for lots of different dancers," Boyd said. "That's what's great: You see everybody onstage."

Since the company's inception, it has performed classic works as well as innovative works from little-known choreographers.

But the bulk of its repertoire is Ailey's choreography, rooted in classical ballet, jazz, Afro-Caribbean dance and the modern-dance techniques of Lester Horton and Martha Graham.

Its narrative is influenced by his experiences growing up impoverished in rural Texas.



The effect of the Baptist churches and honky-tonks of his youth show up in his dances, many of which are counted among the greatest classics of American modern dance.

The greatest among them might be "Revelations," Ailey's 1960 magnum opus. Oprah Winfrey has said: "You haven't lived until you've seen the Ailey company do 'Revelations.'"

One dance critic said that if America had a national dance like it has a national anthem, "Revelations" would be it. The ballet can be shocking in its power.

It has moved audience members to both weep and to leap to their feet in joy.

Boyd acknowledges that in the Alvin Ailey repertoire "there's literally everything you can imagine," and yet, like so many fans of the company, his favorite piece is "Revelations."

Dance concert

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater -- Marking the 50th anniversary of the company, 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, [Miller Auditorium](#), WMU. \$40-\$60. 387-2300.

"I love to dance 'Revelations,'" he said. "You really feel like you're in the Ailey company once you've done that."

Even though "Revelations" is nearly 50 years old, it is transcendent.

"I think what's great about that ballet in part is the dancer within it has evolved in time," Boyd said. "The ballet has stayed pretty much the same, but it's just because the way it was danced back then was exciting. But what the body does now is way beyond that. It's a timeless piece, but you're expected to dance it the way a dancer today would."

The troupe will perform "Revelations" in its entirety as part of the Kalamazoo program. It also will present its new "Anniversary Highlights Program," featuring excerpts from more than a dozen of Ailey's ballets, spanning four decades.

"It includes things that haven't been performed in years. You're getting to see the different shades of Ailey," Boyd said. "There are so many things this man has created."

Not the least of them is one of the most popular, highly regarded modern-dance companies in existence. But what makes it so?

"I really believe it's the diversity in the rep. It's the training, because when you want to be here in this company, you know you need to be technically strong, but you need to be able to do anything pretty much," Boyd said.

"It's the integrity of what we present. It's so many things. You just have to come see it."

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