

THE BIRMINGHAM NEWS

Ailey II in Birmingham: All the fervor and spirit of its parent company

January 28, 2012
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AILEY II at Alys Stephens Center: 5 Starts Out of 5

Besides supplying its parent company with fresh blood, Ailey II, the training and outreach scion of the great Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, is charged with taking Ailey repertory to audiences in smaller cities like Birmingham and Chattanooga. But they can also be seen in places like Cookeville and Sewanee, Tenn., two upcoming stops on Ailey II's ongoing North American tour.

Ailey II's travels are essentially motivated by a fervor to carry the Ailey spirit to whomever has eyes to see and ears to hear. That spirit is perhaps best summed up in Ailey's acclaimed "Revelations," the closing piece of Ailey II's Friday evening performance at the Alys Stephens Center.



"Revelations" is an ensemble piece, rich in athleticism, fluid, complex formations and musical sensitivity. Ailey's choreographic designs most often sync with the structure and tempo of the the score -- spirituals accompanied by an intense beat -- but they can also run counter to the music. Some of the work's most transcendent and tense moments are supplied by dancers in half- or double-time to the musical pulse.

To create "Revelations," Ailey drew on African-American religious experience, and the piece was premiered in 1960 by Ailey's all African-American company. Two years later, the company integrated and, according to dance historian Susan Au, became the vehicle for a "vision more universal in scope, exploring the emotions and dilemmas that all humans share."

As Ailey II's opener, "Shards," demonstrated, this universality could be pushed toward abstraction in later years. "Shards" is constructed out of Ailey's formal trademarks, right down to the opening V formation borrowed from "Revelations" by choreographer Donald Byrd. As the title might suggest, "Shards" is primarily concerned with the splintering of dancers into shapes and groupings, creating an effect a bit like paint falling from Jackson Pollock's brush. While the result is abstract, the work's gestures, coupled with its demanding physicality and relentless drive, root "Shards" in the Ailey of an earlier time.