



Alvin Ailey dancer Clifton Brown talks about the impact of his company's late founder and his masterwork

LENA SIN C5

Seeking connection via Revelations

'AMERICAN PHENOMENON': Alvin Ailey's dancers arrive in Vancouver for masterpiece show

On stage

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Where: Queen Elizabeth Theatre, Hamilton and Georgia streets

When: Friday-Saturday

Tickets: \$40-\$95 (discounts for seniors, students and dancers), ticketmaster.ca or 604-380-3311

BY LENA SIN
STAFF REPORTER

Clifton Brown shares little in common with Alvin Ailey, the late legendary American dancer whose namesake company he now works for.

Yes, both are African-Americans. Both dancers of supreme athleticism. But beyond that, their backgrounds couldn't be more different.

"The differences are pretty vast. I mean, growing up in the '30s in the South as a black person was an incredibly different experience to me growing up in the '80s in Arizona. There are a whole lot of things that people from that time and community had to face that I didn't," says Brown.

But that's the beauty of Ailey's legacy: You needn't have any inkling of what it was like growing up black in southern Texas, shouldering the twin burdens of poverty and segregation, as Ailey did, to understand his expression of sorrow, joy and ultimately holding faith through difficult times.

"Dance came from the people and ... it should always be delivered back to the people." — *The late Alvin Ailey*

That was the truth that catapulted Ailey and the modern dance company he founded half a century ago to stardom, astonishing critics with their technical prowess, but more importantly, their highly charged performances.

Created in 1958 with a group of young black dancers, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is widely credited for giving black people a voice at a racially hostile time when African-American stories weren't being told.

Ailey, however, also fervently believed that "dance came from the people and that it should always be delivered back to the people," a mantra that has allowed the company to transcend racial boundaries.

Today, few modern dance



Left to right, Clifton Brown, Jamar Roberts and Linda Celeste Sims, who star in Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's production of *Revelations*. — SUBMITTED PHOTO

companies are as revered as this one, both in the U.S. and abroad. Oprah Winfrey has called it an "American phenomenon." An Ailey Barbie doll was produced in celebration of the company's 50th anniversary.

And *Revelations*, the masterpiece choreographed by Ailey in 1960, which will be performed in Vancouver for just three shows, is believed to have been seen by more people in the world than any other

modern dance piece. Brown was just 12 years old the first time he watched a video of *Revelations*.

He vaguely recalled Ailey's name as a famous one, and being a young dancer himself, decided to check out

the video from the library. Even as a boy, he was moved.

"I just connected with it. I think most people who see it feel that way and for me, it was on a level of a dancer, yes, because I was a young dancer, but it was also very human," says Brown.

"I think one of the reasons it's a masterpiece is because it's done in a way that's accessible to everyone. It's not saying these people are black and they're having difficulties. ... The name of the first song is 'I Been 'Buked, I Been Scorned,' and everyone's had that experience of being 'buked and being scorned. That can come from anything and that's why *Revelations* is so great."

Revelations is a three-part tapestry set to blues and spiritual music rooted in Ailey's "blood memories" of growing up in Texas.

Born in 1931, Ailey spent much of his youth at church with his mother, where he found a sanctuary singing black gospel songs. It's this spiritual world that is recreated in *Revelations*, with references to prayer, baptism, camaraderie and finally, in the last act "Rocka my Soul," joyous relief in finding faith.

"I just hope they enjoy it and feel a connection. And if it's the first time they've seen a dance performance, I hope it opens their eyes to another world."

— *Clifton Brown on his hopes for his company's performance of Revelations*

Brown has performed *Revelations* countless times (by his estimate, at least a thousand times over a dozen years) yet it never gets old, he says, in part because he often changes roles, but also because the audience reaction is never the same.

"You feed off their energy," he says over the phone from Las Vegas.

Brown, 31, joined the company when he was just 19. Soft-spoken and modest, he's been heralded as one of the company's great dancers, called by critics a "star among stars."

But it's not accolades he's after; just a connection, exactly what Ailey sought all those years earlier.

"I just hope they enjoy it and feel a connection."

"And if it's the first time they've seen a dance performance, I hope it opens their eyes to another world," says Brown.

Which makes him perhaps not all that different from his predecessor, after all.

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