

## Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* Turns 50: Move, Members, Move!

City Center hosts the classic dance

By Deborah Jowitz Wednesday, Dec 8 2010



Paul Kolnik  
The Alvin Ailey American Dance Company  
(Yannick Lebrun, Demetia Hopkins, Kirven James Boyd, and Rosalyn Deshauteurs) in Christopher L. Huggins' *Anointed*.

“Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham!” Sweet Honey in the Rock throws the words up like a tidal wave from the City Center pit, while from a corner of the stage, the voice of Ella Mitchell—which has been heard (both live and recorded) during Alvin Ailey’s 1960 *Revelations* for 37 years—soars above the other singers. One of the celebrations studding AADC’s City Center season is the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday of this work—one of Ailey’s earliest and certainly his greatest.

On the third night of the run, I sit through what may be the most garland-draped performance of *Revelations* ever. Young dancers from Ailey II and a handful of half-pint students from the Ailey school join in the opening “I Been ’Buked”; three men perform the solo “I Wanna Be Ready”; the kids accompany their elders in “Wade in the Water”; Ailey II members dance in every aisle at the climax of “Rocka My Soul.” And suddenly I’m crying.

We go way back, *Rev* and I. I knew Alvin. We’d both danced in one of the annual Hanukkah Festivals at Madison Square Garden and I’d seen his 1958 *Blues Suite*. But I first met *Revelations* at Jacob’s Pillow three years after its premiere (a revelation, it was). So, for me, every performance of it is inevitably a palimpsest. Behind each of its sections, I see shadowy parades of dancers, Ailey himself, James Truitte, Minnie Marshall, Judith Jamison, John Parks, Keith McDaniel, Sarita Allen, Donna Wood, Loretta Abbott, Myrna White, Dudley Williams, and many more.

At its 1960 premiere, *Revelations* had a smaller cast, and the dancing was more rough-edged and less technically showy than it is now, when every Ailey dancer can kick high noon and takes every opportunity to do so. When Marshall and Truitte performed “Fix Me Jesus,” people held their breaths, caught up in the eloquent images of a woman striving for balance and salvation, supported by a calm, gentle man—a minister perhaps. I remember other dancers giving fine performances in this duet (Elizabeth Roxas comes to mind), but it must be hard for performers to focus on the spiritual, when spectators applaud on cue for what have become iconic moments.

Part of what moves audiences to clap along with the music and rise to cheer for encores of “Rocka My Soul” is the prowess of the performers, but they’re also moved, as I am, by the power and joy of the song (“we shall overcome” big time) and by the dancing. The short documentary, produced and directed by Judy Kinberg, that precedes *Revelations* on this season’s programs alternates excerpts of interviews by Ailey and others with excellently chosen vintage footage of black workers in the cotton fields, river baptisms, and carried-away prayer meetings. Ailey, born in Texas, drew on what he heard about, saw, and knew. And the fact that contemporary audiences are moved to get on their feet and shout out praise—for whatever reason—probably seemed appropriate to him.

*Revelations* is a whale of a dance. Compared with the movement palette Ailey used in later works, the style has a contagious homespun feel, and the choreography wastes nothing. Most of the steps aren’t showy in themselves, none is balletic, and you can see the influence of Ailey’s mentor, the West Coast choreographer Lester Horton, whose strong, plain-jane technique is still taught in the Ailey school.

In contrast, *Night Creature* (1974), which opened the City Center program I saw, shows Ailey flirting with ballet. The glamorous denizens of a nightclub world decreed by Duke Ellington’s music play cool elegance against sensual heat and jazz-based steps against virtuosic ones. The wonderful Renee Robinson can snake her hips enough to make her sparkly, sky-blue gown flair, as she leads the ensemble, flirts with Vernard J. Gilmore, leaves him for Amos J. Machanic Jr., and,

temporarily weary of partying, waves everyone off the stage, one by one. But the dancers also throw their legs up in arabesques and high kicks with thrown-back torsos, and, in one of the many show-off sections for small groups, Michael Francis McBride and his coterie fly around beating their feet together in *brisées* and *entrechats six*.

*Night Creature*, one of Ailey's best middle-period works, reminds me what a gift he could summon up for crafting ebullient, theatrically savvy choreography. I note how smoothly he managed getting one group offstage and another on by making the entering steps identical to the overlapping, exiting ones and how he varied spatial patterns to keep the work simmering on its way to a boil.

This season is Jamison's last one as artistic director, before Robert Battle takes over in July 2011. Appropriately, *Cry*, the solo Ailey made for her in 1971, was revived for the 2010 season. This time, the piece's sections are parceled out among three soloists (Linda Celeste Sims, Constance Stamatiou, and Briana Reed), who replace one another unobtrusively in the blackouts. This gives more than one fine performer a chance at Ailey's homage to the resilience and tenacity of African American women. The downside is that you miss seeing one woman endure, persevere, and—finally set free—rejoice. And (palimpsest alert), anyone who saw Jamison perform *Cry* can't help measuring others against her for musicality, honesty, and intense concentration on the moment.

It's also appropriate that former company dancer Christopher L. Huggins made the issue of succession and empowerment the subject of his premiere, *Anointed*, to music by Moby and Sean Clements. This fiercely fast, high-wattage work definitely needs a program note. If you didn't know that Huggins intended it to show Ailey guiding and passing the torch to Jamison, to convey the ensuing development of the enterprise, and to hint at the company's bright future under its new artistic director, you might construe *Anointed* a bit differently. It would be easy, for instance, to see the opening section, "Passing," for Sims and Jamar Roberts, simply as a love duet that also prefigures the man's death (he lies down once and walks offstage alone into a blindingly white light). Yet, primed, you can view Sims's initial tension and the duet's many intriguing lifts—she, curled-up, hanging on her partner, or pushed high—as the interaction of an encouraging mentor and his chosen successor.

You also might wonder why Sims, over the course of the work, keeps appearing in different-colored dresses. And it might be helpful to know that Ghrai DeVore, Rosalyn Deshauteurs, Demetia Hopkins, and Stamatiou are not just four beguilingly strong, no-nonsense female dancers, who appear from nowhere in bright red dresses and orange underpants (costumes by Huggins) to dance their guts out with and for Sims. They stand for all the women who helped Jamison hold the strands of her heritage together and move it forward—women like Sylvia Roberts (director of Ailey II), Ana Marie Forsythe (long-time teacher in the school and director of the Ailey/Fordham BFA program), Nasha Thomas Schmitt (director of Ailey's Arts in Education programs), and the late Denise Jefferson (former director of the Ailey School).

The comings and goings of the company's men and women in the crackling choreography could be considered just business as usual, e.g., knockout dancing, with special applause for DeVore's duet with Daniel Harder. But you might need a bit of help construing the ending, in which Roberts reappears dressed in white, with an over-the-shoulder glance and a "follow me" air, and, at the very last minute, Harder separates himself from the others to stand beside Sims—presumably channeling Battle.

The Alvin Ailey Dance Company—for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health—has been carrying on a love affair with audiences for 52 years. From time to time, you may disagree with a course it's following or despair over a mediocre addition to the repertory or a faded revival, but you'll be lured back time and again by the take-no-prisoners beauty of the dancers, by Ailey's best works, by the occasional new choreographic gem, and by the fact that, every December in New York City, *Revelations* will elbow its way through the *Nutcrackers* to send its gritty message of hope.