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'Revelations' still a revelation

REVIEW Alvin Ailey's seminal work is in step with its times and ours.

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NEW YORK - No matter how many times the dancers of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater perform "Revelations," it evokes tears with its blend of grace and spiritual rapture.

The signature work of America's premier African-American dance company was choreographed by Ailey in 1960, two years after the company's founding, and it combines the optimism, timelessness and African-American cultural resonance that define so much of his work. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the modern dance company, and it is celebrating the milestone with free performances throughout its home base of New York, a five-week engagement in New York beginning in December, international and U.S. tours, and even a Barbie doll inspired by a dancer from "Revelations."

The anniversary is also an occasion for new choreography. One assumes the fresh movement will be a welcome respite for dancers who perform the 32 inspiring minutes of "Revelations," which includes spirituals "Wade in the Water" and "Rock-a My Soul."

Each song serves as accompaniment to part of "Revelations," which ranges from a



minimalist pas de deux to a rousing full-ensemble celebration. During "Wade in the Water" — a coded paean to the abolitionists — the female dancers in long white dresses spin and flutter their arms with the fluidity of waves and the men in white pants move with the grace and potency of a stormy sea. "Rock-a My Soul" propels

the dancers through a section in which the passions of a church revival merge with the physical honesty of modern dance.

Despite the historical nature of some of the costumes, it never seems as though "Revelations" is a relic from the past. The dancers cooling themselves furiously with their fans during "Rock-a My Soul"

could easily have been borrowed from last week's church service. It captures past and present and the echoes between the two.

The dance is rooted in black culture, specifically the church and its role as a source of spiritual counsel and social support. But it isn't limited to that audience. Doesn't every generation — no matter its race or ethnicity — need solace and uplift?

Ailey created "Revelations" before the massive political shifts of the civil rights movement. It came out of an era when traditions were bumping up against the beginnings of change. Its religiosity is offered without irony or skepticism, but with gratitude.

Ailey captured the roiling discontent, the urgency and optimism — as the music shifts from soulful spirituals to rollicking gospel, and the dancers' movements evoke images from classical ballet to traditional African expressions.

Ailey was 58 when he died in 1989 and star dancer Judith Jamison took over as artistic director. Ailey considered "Revelations" a complete work, but it continues to subtly evolve. It remains open, for instance, to a coda influenced by hip-hop's veiled expressions of outrage and calls for justice. Even though that was never part of the original choreography, it could be accommodated because it is part of the continuum on which "Revelations" is built.