

Lights Up! Alvin Ailey's Gang Turns 50

By Deborah Jowitt

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Here's my daydream. I'm walking along 8th Street and meet the ghost of Alvin Ailey. He looks gorgeous—just the way he did when I ran into him over 30 years ago in the same place. "Alvin," I say, "did you know that on the opening night of your company's 50th anniversary season—in honor of it—the top part of the Empire State Building was bathed in gold light?" He looks astounded, thinks I'm kidding (the dance grapevine must not work well where he is). "And," I add, "they've created a special Alvin Ailey Barbie® doll; she's posed in her box as if she's doing those upflung leaps in *Revelations'* 'Take Me to the Water' section, and she's wearing the correct, flouncy white dress for it." He falls on the pavement laughing. But you know what? He's thrilled.

He needn't have been all that surprised. At the time of his death in December 1989, his company had already come a long, long way from the pick-up group he assembled for a Sunday afternoon concert in March 1958 at the 92nd Street Y. His works and his dancers had already been applauded all over the world—although maybe not in all the 71 countries they've appeared in to date.

This half-century celebration is huge. After artistic director Judith Jamison gives the speech that opens the City Center gala, honorary chair Oprah Winfrey comes onstage to talk. Jessye Norman, one of several guest musicians of note that first night, sings *Revelations'* "Fix Me Jesus." During the "Ailey & Ellington" week (December 17 through 21), Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra will accompany dances that Ailey, Talley Beatty, and Donald McKayle set to the Duke's music. Reinforcing AADC's identity as a repertory company, new works are being programmed, along with classics like Ailey's *Blues Suite*—which premiered on that 1958 program Ailey shared with Ernest Parham—and *Revelations*, which has brought audiences to their feet since 1960. Many works (or highlights from them) by a variety of choreographers are on view.

The centennial spills over into 2009 with performances at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in May, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in June, and in over 30 U.S. cities. AADC toured Europe this past fall. (I hope you're listening, Alvin. I don't want to bore you with stats, but this is something!)

The two premieres are *Go in Grace*, by company member Hope Boykin, and *Festa Barocca* by the in-demand Italian choreographer Mauro Bigonzetti. I saw the first on a program it shared with Ailey's 1979 *Memoria* and *Revelations*. Boykin, a knockout dancer, is still a novice in terms of choreography; her first piece, *Acceptance in Surrender*, performed by AADC in 2005, was a collaboration with two colleagues, Abdur-Rahim Jackson and Matthew Rushing. *Go in Grace* was a difficult assignment (a press release mentions the "collaborative concept" of Jamison). The piece tells the story of a family sustained by the love among parents and children and between them and the community. The strongest thing about it is the onstage singing-dancing-acting presence of the six wonderful women of Sweet Honey in the Rock (Ysaye Maria Barnwell, Nitanju Bolade Casel, Aisha Kahlil, Carol Maillard, Louise Robinson, and Sign Language interpreter Shirley Childress Saxton). Even though serious overamplification does them no service, their voices are indeed honeyed, and their personas sweet (if no-nonsense tough and often witty).

These performers weave among and around the dancers—their voices exhorting, consoling, inspiring; sometimes they all talk softly at once, like neighbors comparing their views. They approve of the family members; they're good people, even if the father (Amos J. Machanic Jr.) is a bit straitlaced. However, his wife (Renee Robinson), son (Matthew Rushing), and daughter (Rosalyn Deshauteurs) seem happy to hold his hand and walk in a chain behind him. They make a handsome picture in their yellow and orange clothes (costumes by Boykin), and Al Crawford's lighting makes the stage a sunny place (although the several designs projected



Paul Kolnik

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Hope Boykin's "Go in Grace"

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on the cyclorama are unattractive and not very relevant). The main thrust of the story is that of the daughter's growing up (indicated by changes of attire and an increasingly bold style of dancing).

Boykin does a fine job of mingling the two groups and of revealing through steps and simple gestures the parents' affection for each other and their kids, the daughter's adoration of her father, and the well-behaved son's attraction to the boisterous style of two less "respectable" neighborhood "boyz." These guys (Antonio Douthit and Kirven J. Boyd) don't initially "act." They just kite through repeatedly, doing the most vivid and interesting steps in the piece. It's no wonder Rushing wants to join them and gradually does so, to the distress of his dad. Boykin gives us a hint that the father, too, once knew how to move like that and be that hard-hitting, but when he's alone onstage and tries a few of the boys' steps, he doubles over (presaging a subsequent fatal heart attack).

The tale of *Go in Grace* is a sweet one. The two neighborhood guys aren't really bad; they're on hand to comfort the bereaved family. The wife soothes away her son's guilt (he worries that anger at him caused his father's death). The daughter sees a brief vision of the deceased (now clothed in white) and can draw on the memory of all he taught her (a father-daughter ballroom-dance lesson is very charming). And everything that Boykin truthfully and movingly sketches through her terrific dancers is buoyed up by those big-voiced, big-hearted neighbors, who are as adaptable and strong as the tides of the sea.

Go in Grace seems all the more admirable in terms of clarity and modesty when seen after *Memoria*, created by Ailey in 1979 in honor of dancer-choreographer Joyce Trisler, who died that year. Trisler was an important figure in his history. He'd known her since their days as performers in the Los Angeles group run by Lester Horton. She had performed with AADC, in addition to choreographing for her own Danscompany. Her beautiful solo *Journey* appeared on and off in the Ailey repertory. She was teaching at the Ailey school.

Memoria was made while the choreographer was deep in grief. Lyrical, effusive, and sometimes incoherent, it presents his friend as a noble, searching figure—first dressed in a long white gown, later in a flaming red one. Trisler, with whom I danced in the early days of her company, was frank, smart, funny, and an extremely skilled choreographer (the last thanks in part to the mentorship of Doris Humphrey). Ailey was not so much making a portrait of her as deifying her through mourning.

Certain gestures recognizable at the work's premiere as being from Trisler's choreography—notably *Journey*—have eroded over time (I'm thinking especially of the way she pressed her hands over her ears, as if to shut out the siren call of Charles Ives's *The Unanswered Question*). However, the company, as you'd expect, performs every step ardently. Linda Celeste Sims is beautiful and eloquent as the central figure, and her two mysterious cavaliers (Machanic and Clifton Brown) attend her nobly. There are fine passages early on for couples in white who soar through (and some especially excellent dancing by Rushing), but the stage becomes weighed down with a kind of confectionary architecture of loss, spooling along to the music of Keith Jarrett. A small ensemble in long, plain modern-dance dresses appears. So does a 25-member cohort of students from the Ailey School, all clad in various bright, bi-colored ensembles (perhaps they, and the joyous wiggle that Sims puts into her dancing in the second section, represent the nightclub part of Lester Horton's work). In the end, they cluster around Sims and lift her high, so that she turns into a single tongue of flame.

The audience loves the Ailey dancers, and with good reason. Spectators are also primed for ecstasy, particularly when it comes to *Revelations*. It's not just that this is a great work; it's an applause machine, and spectators often act as if they've taken a course called "When to Clap During *Rev.*" They applaud before the curtain goes up. Sometimes they clap if the woman in the sublime duet "Fix Me Jesus" lifts one leg high in front of her and then arches very far back, supported only by her partner's outstretched hand gripping hers (a distortion on the dancer's part of the duet's meaning and ambiance). Their palms start whacking together in rhythm as soon as "Rocka My Soul" strikes up. By the time they've coaxed the performers into an encore, folks are waving their arms and dancing in the aisles. They've had the *Revelations* experience.

I feel it too, even if aspects of it rile me. Tears inevitably come to my eyes during "Rocka My Soul." I'm lifted high by the wonderful gusto of the old spiritual; the lively, well-designed patterns; the simple, gutsy movements without a hint of balleticism or show-off steps; and the dancers' generosity and transcendent spirit. The performance of *Revelations* that I saw programmed with *Memoria* and *Go in Grace* was an uneven one—some ups, some downs (like a strangely disconnected rendition of "Fix Me Jesus" by Constance Stamatiou and Jamar Roberts). For me, the high of the whole evening was Brown's performance of "I Want to Be Ready." He draws a consistent thread of meaning and emotion through this powerful solo, in which a man strains in different ways to rise from the floor and keeps being pulled down. Taut, constrained, reticent, Brown keeps the desire for salvation simmering through his body. You can't take your eyes off him; you can barely breathe; and when he's done, applause seems an inadequate reward.

I hope you drop by City Center to see this, Alvin.