

ALVIN AILEY, JR.

Judith Jamison also spoke: "He gave me legs until I could stand on my own as a dancer and a choreographer. He made us believe we could fly."

Writer Maya Angelou, reading from a poem written especially for the occasion, eulogized Ailey with these words: "When great trees fall, rocks on distant hills shudder. . . . Small things recoil into silence. . . . Lord, give him all the pliéés he needs into eternity."

Alvin Ailey Jr., by J. Linda Lewis Ferguson
1994

C H A P T E R E I G H T

A S A M P L E R O F
A I L E Y D A N C E S

Alvin Ailey's adult life was centered in great part around dance. It is thus only fitting that some of his most important, best-loved dances be discussed at some length.

Said Ailey in the winter 1989 issue of *Attitude* magazine:

I wanted to express the richness of the early Black material of my life. . . . I wanted to trace folk songs and remnants of antiquity and connect them into a theatrical fabric. That became my first idea for the Company. That's the reason Blues Suite was on my first concert program. It was my first exploration into Black material. Two years later, Revelations was a reverberation of the same idea.

Blues Suite (1958)

It remains one of Mr. Ailey's best pieces.

—Jack Anderson, *The New York Times*

With its burlesque humor and joyful tone, it seems a light work, yet it's underlaid with pathos.

—Kristy Montee, *Sun-Sentinel*, Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Ailey is not content to mourn without hope of celebration. . . . It is a work that not only stands out in Ailey's own choreographic canon, but one of the most effective, sincere tributes to an artist-friend in dance.

—Barton Wimble, *New York Daily News*

Many critics consider *Blues Suite*, Ailey's first major work, to be his second-best piece. The sounds and feelings of the blues are the inspiration for it. The "sporting house," or "bawdyhouse," is the setting. The women who work there are flashily dressed. They and their male customers are scattered about the stage, weighted down by the double burdens of Southern heat and social despair. The "Good Morning Blues" is their wake-up call. The music inspires them to stir, lazily at first. Each of the characters has an attitude. Then, in "Mean Ol' Frisco," a group of men perform a dance that allows them to express their feelings of frustration. The women are given a turn of their own with "House of the Rising Sun;" the lyrics and move-

ments explore the feelings that led the women to a house of prostitution and what it is that made them stay. Throughout the dance, the men strut and swagger, but their bravado is all on the surface. It is clear that they are struggling to either deny or deal with their anger and dissatisfaction with their lives. The women sashay sassily and toss their feather boas, but beneath the glitter they, too, are hiding lost dreams. "In the Evening" finds them all getting ready to repeat the charade of their lives again.

Just like real life, the dance is not all about dejection and rejection. There are some light moments when the women flirt with the men, first pretending not to care about them, then changing their minds. One woman tries to be brighter and sexier and to get more attention than the others. She fails comically. The characters interact with anger, tenderness, love, and a whole range of familiar and recognizable emotions. It has a powerful effect on the audience. The return of "Good Morning Blues" is a signal that yet another day and night have gone by, and nothing has changed. Tomorrow, they will sing the blues yet again.

Music: Traditional folk music, Paquita Anderson, José Ricci. *Original scenery and costumes:* Geoffrey Holder. *First performance:* March 30, 1958, at the 92nd Street YM-YWHA, New York, NY. *Original cast:* *Dancers:* Julius Fields, Lavinia Hamilton, Tommy Johnson, Audrey Mason, Charles Moore, Charles Neal, Dorene

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Richardson, Liz Williams, and Claude Thompson.
Singers: Clarence Cooper and Nancy Reddy.

Revelations (1960)

Is there a more moving work in 20th century dance than Revelations?

—Richard Christiansen, *Chicago Tribune*

The singular masterpiece of the Ailey repertoire.

—Katie Gunther, *Baltimore Sun*

Powerful and eloquent dancing characterize the company in Ailey's timeless tribute to humanity, faith and survival.

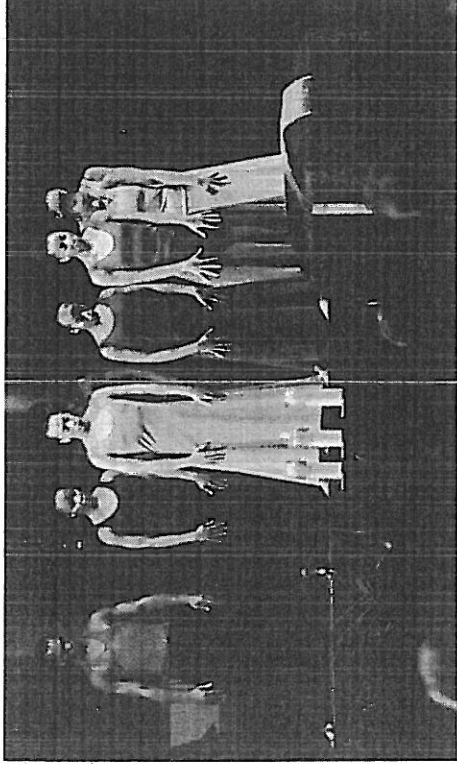
—Clive Barnes, *New York Post*

Ailey's great masterpiece of 1960 [is a] tribute to the black heritage in America.

—Anna Kisselgoff, *The New York Times*

Revelations is the company's best known and most popular piece. Of the three major sections that originally made up the dance, two remain: "Pilgrim of Sorrow" and "Move, Members, Move." The work was changed a short time after its first performance. As the company grew larger, *Revelations* grew to include the new dancers.

Of the original sixteen songs, five are still part of the suite more than thirty years later. Some of the songs that Ailey originally found inspiring were elim-



The company in the opening of *Revelations*, at Alvin Ailey's funeral, 1989.

(Photo by Hakim Mutlaq)

inated or replaced with other, equally inspiring songs. Ailey felt these new songs more accurately reflected his vision and the growing technical skills of his dancers. The work most recently included ten songs under three major groupings: "Pilgrim of Sorrow," "Take Me to the Water," and "Move, Members, Move." Some of the songs added to the work, such as "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel," "I Want to Be Ready," and "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham," have become audience favorites. Often, the audience is inspired to tap their feet and clap along as they get caught up in the spirit of an African-American church service. Perhaps that is exactly what Ailey intended in choosing these works.

"This suite," according to the original program, "explores motivations and emotions of Negro religious

music which, like its heir the Blues, takes many forms." Later, some words of the poet Langston Hughes were added. They provided additional historical background while further explaining the artist's intent: "The Spirituals ask no pity for their words ride on the strongest of melodies, the melody of faith. That is why there is joy in their singing, peace in their music, and strength in their soul."

Revelations begins with the dancers clustered together in a group, in the center of the stage, arms stretched over their heads. This formation has been on posters all over the world. Even people who have never seen *Revelations* performed can identify the dance from pictures. But what is harder to see in a picture is the way the golden light streaming down from the ceiling frames the dancers. They appear to be bathed in a golden blessing from heaven.

The words to the introductory section—"I been 'buked, and I been scorn'd, children, I been talked about, sure as you're born"—tell the audience that this work is going to speak about triumph over difficulties. A person who can overcome "rebuks"—unjust criticism or oppression—must be a strong person, one who possesses great faith. This sentiment is reiterated in the following section, "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?" which reminds us of the biblical tale of Daniel's rescue from the lion's den.

In a gentler mode, "Fix Me, Jesus" is a quiet prayer

of a dance for a man and woman—an adagio, in dance terminology. The duet makes a smooth transition into the middle section, "Take Me to the Water," which represents a symbolic baptism or ritual cleansing.

The "Processional" is a joyous occasion for a party dressed in white, under the direction of a woman bearing a large white umbrella. Many people will long remember Judith Jamison as the woman with the umbrella, but the umbrella has another historical significance as well. It was one of the props that Ailey developed a fondness for as a result of his apprenticeship with Lester Horton.

Two long strips of fabric are unfurled across the width of the stage and rise and fall like waves as the dancers step through the "water." Again taking its inspiration from the black church, this symbolic baptism leads to a search for ever-deepening faith. This search is symbolized in dance by a male soloist accompanied by the song "I Want to Be Ready." The man, aware of his sins, pleads in prayer for forgiveness and strength. He lifts his body upward from his reclining position, arms stretched toward heaven.

The highly energetic final section of the work starts off with three men running, sometimes on their knees, trying to hide from their sins or from the punishment for their sins. "Sinner Man" depicts the very human condition of men, aware of their shortcomings, promising to do better, and finding it extremely diffi-

cult to always do the right thing. The famous fan scene, "The Day Is Past and Gone," finds the women of the church dressed in their Sunday best, their wide-brimmed hats as much a fashion statement or a sign of their status as protection from the Southern summer sun. They enter fanning themselves against the heat and take their time greeting one another before settling down. The finale, "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham," is both a spiritually powered conclusion to the suite and a purely physical release of emotion.

What makes this dance speak to people the world over, regardless of their particular situation or religious beliefs? People everywhere can identify with the universal themes of victory over adversity and of drawing strength from faith in God or another higher being. The situation for black people in America that created spirituals has been replicated in every society, for different reasons—political, economic, religious, racial. What Ailey tapped into with *Revelations* was not just African-American culture, but a common bond with all of humanity.

Music: Traditional spirituals. *First performance:* January 31, 1960, at the 92nd Street YM-YWHA, New York, NY. *Original cast:* Dancers: Joan Derby, Merle Derby, Jay Fletcher, Nathaniel Horne, Herman Howell, Minnie Marshall, and Dorene Richardson. *Singers:* Gene Hobgood and Nancy Reddy, with the Music Masters Guild Chorus of the Harlem Branch YMCA.

Hermit Songs (1961)

A dramatic little gem.

—Julinda Lewis, *Dance Magazine*

Hermit Songs is a celebration of robust manhood.

—Jennifer Dunning, *The New York Times*

Alvin Ailey created *Hermit Songs* for himself. While many of his dances were about the African-American experience, *Hermit Songs* was about the inner struggles of a cloistered medieval religious man, a European. It was set to songs by Samuel Barber, based on poems written by Irish monks and scholars from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries. The chanting of the sacred poems and the eerie and, to our ears, unfamiliar and ancient sound of the music, create a sense of distance and inspire a feeling of awe.

In the beginning of the dance, a monk in a dark, hooded robe begins to dance in a small circle. He is intent on his prayers or inner thoughts. As the dance develops, we see various and subtle aspects of the cleric's personality and motivation. There is tenderness, strength, humility, compassion, pain, uncertainty, questioning of faith. All of this is expressed in a tightly defined area of the stage, by a man whose body is mostly covered by a long robe. The dancer must use small gestures, subtle turns of the head and the merest hint of motion to create a very moving, powerful dance. After Ailey's death, *Hermit Songs* was revived