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Improvisation

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A Revelation Between Dance and Racism

For years, acclaimed choreographer, dancer, and director Alvin Ailey has inspired copious dancers with his exuberant knowledge and talent in concert dance. Ailey's most notable piece of choreography, titled *Revelations* (1960), not only brought a newfound sense of movement to the stage, but also established a prominent message which signified a relationship between dance and racism. *Revelations* is a modern dance piece with balletic influences which displays African American journeys from slavery to freedom. *Revelations* utilizes music, which has both assisted and impacted the journey of these people. This music includes gospel, blues, as well as spiritual hymns, which were known to have been sung when trying to communicate secret messages with one another (Turnham). The consensus among choreographers and dancers alike is that Ailey's work is defined to be the beginning of a new era for modern dance. Alvin Ailey not only focused on his choreography, which was based on Horton technique, but he also maintained a strong story and message to assist his movement. Roy Lee Cowser Jr. mentions, "Ailey has combined in this one dance the deepest religious feeling with a jaunty earthiness, the sacred with the profane, subdued solos with pulsating corps segments, songs of sorrow with songs of joy, and the purest of classical steps with outright show-biz theatricality" (37). Cowser assists in understanding Ailey's work and the impact that it has on the concert stage. Alvin Ailey is an influential artist whose choreography and message portray immense impact on the history of dance and racism. *Revelations* by Alvin Ailey highlights the relationship of dance and racism

by utilizing his experience as an African American growing up in the South to inspire movement, music, and by impacting the concert stage by bringing more diversity to the stage.

Ailey's powerful choreography in *Revelations* offered audiences "an immediate experience of life at its worst and best" (Dunning). Through the various sections of this piece, Ailey conveys emotions all the way from sorrow to joy. His extraordinary warmth and unabashed persona were both influential in his success in connecting with his audience. Alvin Ailey was born in Rogers, Texas on January 5, 1931, to his mother Lulu, who was only 16 when she had him (Black History Now). During his childhood, Ailey was fascinated by Baptist church choirs and the songs they sang. He began not only developing a passion for music and dance but also an understanding of his cultural experience. When Ailey was a teen, his school went on a field trip to watch the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, a famous ballet company at the time, which completely enthralled him. To Alvin Ailey's luck, a mutual friend of his introduced Ailey to Lester Horton, who was a strong figure in modern dance technique and established one of the only dance schools that accepted black students. Ailey received a full scholarship from Horton, began his training, and later worked his way up to lead dancer (Black History Now). Ailey's first showcase of his own choreography occurred in 1958, when he premiered his first work, *Blue Suites*, at the 92nd Street Young Men's and Women's Hebrew Association. It was at his third production at 92nd Street when Ailey premiered *Revelations* which "secured his position as one of the foremost choreographers in America" (Black History Now). Alvin Ailey established his company and dance school, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre (AAADT), in 1969 and the company has since brought forth captivating choreography that still impacts concert stages to this day. Moreover, Ailey's choreography and adaptability greatly influenced the concert stage, especially his creation of *Revelations*.

Revelations has been an influential work since its premiere and has impacted the concert stage with its powerful choreography and moving story. This piece includes many distinctive movements that relate to the overarching presentation of African American journeys from slavery to freedom. Shaw mentions, “Through three distinctly symbolic movements, audience members developmentally witness dancers emote a passionate communal journey through the emotional spectrum of human life” (7). One movement in particular which demonstrates this idea is when the dancers have their “arms are fully extended, placed low, palms facing forward” in the first number titled, Pilgrim of Sorrow: I’ve Been ‘Buked (Shaw 10). This movement becomes a reoccurring theme within *Revelations* which “represents reaching for God” (G. Chao page 3). These linear shapes and intriguing poses help an audience visualize the story that a choreographer is trying to portray. Additionally, Alvin Ailey captivates an audience by “talking” about a subject which was so controversial at the time. Because this dance was created by an African American choreographer and performed during the Civil Rights Movement, this story had an immense impact on the concert stage and the political world. The success of *Revelations* led individuals to travel far and wide to witness the performance and feel what others experienced when they watched this dance. Shaw notes, “Watching Alvin Ailey’s work provides witnesses a clear canvas to use, so that we may as collective viewers connect with his movement and projected sensations, feel them dancing within ourselves, and come to paint our own portraits of who we are” (7). This dance has become a notable work due to the emotional and political impact that an audience experiences when watching.

The Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre (AAATD) has impacted the concert stage by carrying the legacy of Alvin Ailey’s work and maintaining his brilliant choreographic and artistic choices. Before Ailey created AAATD, many dance companies included white, cisgendered, heterosexual

individuals. Ailey changed the trajectory of this common stereotype in dance when he introduced his company to the world. Cowser claims, “Alvin Ailey changed all that; his integrated company of black, white, and Oriental dancers removed much of the misgivings and suspicions from the term modern dance” (40). AAATD included a diverse cast, which influenced the concert stage as other companies started to incorporate members of various races, ethnicities, etc. AAATD continues to carry Ailey’s choreographic and artistic choices by still performing Ailey’s repertory as well as the choreography of upcoming artists. In addition, after every show in which AAATD performs, they always close the show with *Revelations*. With this piece, Alvin Ailey “discovered the formula for presenting the black experience in a way that was comprehensible to all audiences” (Cowser 4). AAATD influences the concert stage by upholding Ailey’s legacy and performing his astounding work, *Revelations*. Along with Ailey’s repertory still being performed by AAATD, there are also historical and personal events which motivated the creation of *Revelations*.

Ailey’s experiences growing up as an African American man as well as the Civil Rights Movement both aided in the design and message of *Revelations*. As previously mentioned, Alvin Ailey grew up in Rogers, Texas, with his single mother, who was extremely poor. Because of this, the pair moved very often and had to rotate between various jobs, which included working seasonally in the cotton fields. Ailey also went to a Baptist church with his mother where he learned and memorized various hymns and chants. These songs later became integrated into *Revelations* with choreography to mirror the emotions of these hymns. Shaw noted, “His specific integration of cultural history and movement makes him a brilliant choreographer and a universal messenger that our stories are housed within the body” (23). Ailey’s inspiration for *Revelations* came from those experiences he encountered when he was growing up, such as the Civil Rights

Movement. The Civil Rights Movement was a non-violent social movement to assist in legalizing the abolishment of racial segregation and discrimination. Alvin Ailey felt inspired by this when creating *Revelations* and felt that this work needed to be seen by the public to aid in the mission of this movement. Because dance was so popular at the time, hundreds and thousands of individuals witnessed *Revelations* and became entranced by its story. Ailey himself was a civil rights activist and through his choreography and dancing, presented that segregation and discrimination should be abolished. Because of its impactful story, *Revelations* is known as an integral and revolutionary dance on the concert stage. *Revelations* utilizes historical and personal experiences to enhance the overall performance of this piece. In the same way that this feature of *Revelations* impacts the overall work, the roots of the choreography do the same.

As of 2023, the AAATD still performs on stages internationally, carrying on the legacy of Alvin Ailey's repertory and most precious work, *Revelations*. To this day, *Revelations* remains one of the most influential dance pieces on the concert stage. The story it presents, choreography, technical inspiration from Lester Horton, and much more all contribute to the work's overall success with audience members all over the world. What is significant is that *Revelations* inspires generations of upcoming dancers to provide exceptional performances with meaningful topics which relate to current issues. Through *Revelations*, Ailey has impacted future dancers to create pieces about pressing global issues such as climate change, LGBTQIA+ rights, and much more. In this way, *Revelations* is important because of its deep meaning, choreographic aesthetics, connection between dance and racism, and a message of African American journeys from slavery to freedom. Seeing this piece in person will not only change a person's life, especially a dancer's, by igniting them with a revelation.

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