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Oh, Rock-a-My-Soul

Bill T. Jones brings dignity to the Hult

Art has its Mona Lisa. Music has its fifth symphony. And modern dance has "Revelations," a masterpiece by one of the most important contributors to dance in our time: Alvin Ailey. This piece, a genius subterfuge of Afro-Caribbean rhythms, modern technique, theatrical costuming and set work, consistently strikes a universal chord. This is the Mohammed Ali of dances, recognized and beloved the world over.

"Revelations," along with a selection of Ailey's other works, will be performed at the Hult by Ailey II, the Ailey School's younger company, under the direction of the inimitable Sylvia Waters. Ailey II began as a workshop initiated by Alvin Ailey in 1974 in which Ailey handpicked the Ailey School's most promising scholarship students as members, and these technical and artistic wunderkinds have been touring internationally ever since.

Ailey II comes from a good background. Born the son of cotton pickers in Rogers, Texas in 1931, Alvin Ailey was a dancer, choreographer and director and studied with dance giants Lester Horton, Martha Graham, Hanya Holm and Charles Weidman. After Horton's death, a young Ailey filled some big shoes at the helm of Horton's company. He premiered as a performer in New York in 1957, and in 1958 he formed the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. His creative work paralleled his signature movement style: Graceful, larger than life, with a consistently dynamic dialogue between richly lyrical gesture and unhooked rhythmic energy.

In his memoirs, Ailey recounts the moment of realization when he came to grips with maturing as perhaps the most disenfranchised citizen imaginable: He came from a racist and impoverished South, he was gay, he was black, and as a teen, to his horror, he realized that his calling was as a dancer. From the first, he wasn't afraid to use his art to comment on his world. Ailey's earliest works, "Blues Suite" and "Revelations," directly confront the patterns of poverty and racism. But he doesn't hammer you over the head. He uses music — traditional gospel music and spirituals, jazz, blues — the music that quenched the parched Depression era Texas of his youth. He uses humor and emotional engagement to pull you in. It's performing art in its most integrative, social form.

Summarizing Ailey's canonical stature poses a challenge. His work punched through the ceiling and built ten more floors, demolishing barriers of race, religion, sexuality and culture. Alvin Ailey was lead architect of dance's 20th century paradigm shift: Legitimated dance per-



EDUARDO PATINO

Ailey II
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formance made by people of diverse backgrounds and shades, presented for plural audiences.

When I was a young dance student, one of my college professors had worked with Ailey in the same companies, and I loved to hear her stories about those early days: "We were all broke, living in New York. But we were making dances."

Fifty years after Ailey got his start, not much has changed in this nation's performing arts: Budgetary constraints threaten companies and venues, directors choose whether to costume or to present a show, tours dwindle, educational programs wither, dancers live without health insurance or benefits and most of them, even in professional companies, go on forced unemployment at various times throughout the year. As a metaphor for this unwavering artistic scrappiness, look for the richly inventive stage designs Ailey pulled together on the cheap for "Revelations": White parasols transform the stage to create a community gathering, fabric slices horizontally to make an ocean and simple wooden stools facilitate the longest "sit" in dance history.

Like any performing artist in economized America, Ailey never outpaced money concerns, nor did he completely outrun the gnawing effect of the racism that had surrounded his childhood. But between hope and anger, he made dances that are resolutely poignant and remarkably accessible. As Ailey said, "Dance is for everybody. I believe that the dance came from the people and that it should always be delivered back to the people." **EW**

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