

March 8, 2017

Social justice is put into motion

MLK's speeches are translated into dance as Alvin Ailey troupe comes to L.A.

BY JOSEPH CARMAN

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater gives the first of six performances at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion on Wednesday, and woven through the run will be one prominent thread: social justice.

Through Sunday the company will rotate nine works — three of them West Coast premieres, including "Untitled America," MacArthur fellow and choreographer Kyle Abraham's meditation on the effects of the prison system on African American families.

Also among the new works is veteran Ailey dancer and choreographer Hope Boykin's "r-Evolution, Dream." The work, Boykin's third ballet for Ailey and a Music Center commission, is based on Martin Luther King Jr.'s orations. Boykin commissioned a score from jazz composer Ali Jackson, and Tony Award-winner Leslie Odom Jr. (Aaron Burr in "Hamilton") supplies the narration for the ballet, which features 15 dancers.

Boykin shared her thoughts about the process [See Boykin, E12]

[Boykin, from E1] and manifestation of "r-Evolution, Dream." for this conversation, which has been lightly edited for length.

What was your inspiration for the piece?

I went to visit the Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta. I got a chance to listen to Dr. King's voice and watch the footage of his funeral with the casket running through the city. I was moved by the cadence and the sound of his voice. I decided to download some things and go into the studio, and after that it just turned into something.

Ali Jackson's heady score might stump a lot of choreographers. How were you able to negotiate it, and how does it speak to you?

He's a friend of mine, and we have the same temperament when it comes to art, music and dance. It's easy for me to communicate to him. It's really collaborative. There were times when I would tell him what my intent was, and he would say, "It should do this." It made perfect sense.

I would say, "I want it to sound like this in the women's dance," and I would hum — not necessarily a melody, but a type of rhythm. He was at the piano and started to play a melody. I said, "I like that, but can you do a little bit more of this."

It wasn't like, "Here it is — do what you will with it." We really worked together.

How did you determine which parts of MLK's speeches and other texts to use?

I tried to take as much as I could from things that truly moved me. And what ended up benefiting me more than anything else was the fact that Dr. King quoted so many great scholars and authors — and I extracted those excerpts.

There's nothing original from Dr. King, but they're still recognizable things he said. Even when he spoke about how he courted Coretta, he quoted an ex-

cerpt from a Shakespeare sonnet. It reminded and taught me that he was truly a scholar. He was more than just a great orator.

And then I included some writings of my own because I wanted to draw things together.

How does this piece address today's political climate?

I think you have to go back to Dr. King. I'm not telling his story, but he does have a representative character in the ballet. I say this, and I've said it before: that if you were to just substitute certain dates or words that he used, you would think he was talking today. It's not over. He often talked about how the only menial part of labor is menial pay. People are still experiencing that. Equality needs to happen now. We have to listen and pay attention to what is really happening in society today.

How has King's legacy impacted and influenced you?

My mom graduated from college in the 1950s, and she can recall things and tell certain stories. She opened up a door for me that was opened for her because of people like Dr. King. I look at Judith Jamison, who hired me — she's our artistic director emeritus — and I think about this woman clearing a path for people like me to move forward. Mr. Ailey created his company in the middle of the civil rights movement. All of these trials and struggles they've gone through — that helped me, and I have to do the same thing for the generation that comes after.



PAUL KOLNIK

ALVIN AILEY American Dance Theater performs Hope Boykin's "r-Evolution, Dream.," based on Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches.

How do you translate your movement quality onto other dancers' bodies?

In general, there are always people who get you and others who have to learn what to do. I like both of those aspects. Not everything should look like I've done it as long as I've tried to express and share many ideas and colors, tastes and flavors. If that person is

being honest and accepting my honesty, then the work transfers itself. I like what Mr. Ailey said — he didn't like cookie-cutter dancers. He wanted dancers to be individuals. That's what I think is so incredible about the dancers in this company. We do honor the choreography and the steps, but we're still allowed to be ourselves.

Ailey's artistic director, Robert Battle, champions works that address social issues. Did he encourage you to work along those lines, or is this just what you wanted to do?

I think he was pleased when he saw what I was working toward. I don't think it was because he was commissioning that particular thing. As artists, it's our responsibility to express the time we're living in. I'm very much a "light at the end

of the tunnel" type girl. I like a happy ending. But there's still a path of truth to get there.

Can you describe your own personal evolution in creating "r-Evolution, Dream."?

It is about revolution and evolution.

I wanted a lowercase R in the title because I wanted it to be focused on the evolution of our selves. I think until we fix "us," until we decide we're going to be kind and generous and loving — and that doesn't mean foolish or passive — once we've done that, and we evolve, we can launch a revolution. People can see we're not going to tolerate anger and meanness. I haven't gotten there, and there is no end, but it is a constant traverse.

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HOPE BOYKIN says Martin Luther King Jr.'s words are relevant today.