

Edinburgh International Festival preview: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Programme 1 and 2

By: Kelly Apter
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American choreographer and dancer Joyce Trisler was just 45 years old when she died. Her untimely death in 1979 felt like a tragedy no good could ever come from. But shortly after, still in the midst of grief and looking for a way to capture the impact Trisler had on her colleagues, students and friends, Alvin Ailey created a new work in her honour. Memoria allowed Ailey to pay tribute to a friendship spanning more than 30 years and to portray the true essence of Trisler.



Not only that, the work has given countless young dancers an opportunity to experience Ailey's work from the inside. When Memoria premiered in New York in 1979, it featured students from the Ailey School and dancers from Ailey II alongside the main company. This coming together of youth and vitality has been an important part of the work ever since: regardless of where it's being performed in the world, local dancers become part of the show. The latest crop hail from Scotland and will be seen in Edinburgh this August, performing with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at the International Festival.

"Alvin Ailey created the work at a sad time," says the company's artistic director, Robert Battle. "Joyce Trisler was an amazing dancer, choreographer and teacher and he wanted to make a work to celebrate her life, but also the way she passed on the torch to her students and other people who were inspired by her. So by giving this opportunity to local dancers, it creates the kind of collaborative spirit that should be a part of every classroom. We always say that dance brings people together and builds communities and this is a visible reflection of that in so many ways."

Earlier this year, the International Festival invited emerging dancers in Scotland aged 18–25 to apply for a slot in Memoria. Crucially, as well as it being a paid opportunity, participants' travel and accommodation costs were also covered in a bid to remove barriers to participation. "You talk about putting your money where your mouth is, and this is a prime example of that," says Ronni Favors, a dancer with the Ailey company for many years and now their rehearsal director. "Accessibility has been at the forefront of this project, to make sure people who don't normally get this kind of opportunity, do. Rather than it being based on connections or who knows who. And that is definitely a huge part of what Alvin Ailey was about – opening things up so that more people could have this kind of experience."

Favors was in the rehearsal studio when Ailey first created Memoria, so carries the piece deep in her bones. After the initial sifting of applications, 144 young Scottish or Scotland-based dancers were invited to audition – a process that Favors worked hard to ensure was "as joyful as possible" so that regardless of the outcome, it was a positive experience for all. In the end, just 22 were chosen to take part. "We were looking for people with light in their eyes," says Favors, "and that just really love to dance. Of course they had to have a certain technical ability because excellence is part of what we're about, but it was also about feeling, and heart, and about being able to sense someone's joy of movement."

That joy will be most evident in the second half of Memoria, a large group scene that Ailey called 'In Celebration'. And according to Favors, it's not just the Scottish newcomers that benefit from their involvement. "It's also a great experience for the current dancers," she says, "especially when we do it outside New York because then the local dancers are even more wide-eyed about being in the room with the company. It's refreshing for the dancers and I think they can see their younger selves in these new dancers coming in and can feel their excitement. After years of doing this it becomes a job to a certain extent and it's easy to forget what a big deal it actually is to be in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater."

It's not unheard of for dance companies to bulk out their numbers with local talent, but rarely do those joining the piece play such an intrinsic part at such a high level. All of which stems back to Ailey's intent when he first choreographed the piece – to echo the joy and spirit of his good friend, and her desire to give opportunities to others. "I tell the local dancers that Mr Ailey choreographed them into Memoria on purpose, so they have a mission," says Favors. "They're not like little kids in the Nutcracker dancing behind the candy canes, they're not just supporting cast. They each have an integral role in creating this emotional journey that the audience will go on."

Memoria forms part of a triple bill of Ailey works in the second of two Festival programmes, with the company also delivering exciting works by Aszure Barton and Kyle Abraham in Programme 1. As always, both programmes will close with Ailey's 1960 work Revelations – a poignant, uplifting, thrilling and passionate piece that provokes standing ovations wherever and whenever it plays.

“Revelations is iconic, it's genius, it's a masterpiece,” says Battle. “But it's also a phenomenon, because I can't think of another dance work that has that resonance over time. And that's why we do it all the time, because it doesn't get old. You can see it as expressing the ills of mankind, in terms of what African Americans have gone through in our own country. But it's also a reflection of the trials and tribulations of every person and the idea of overcoming through hope. And the work ends with such a sense of joy, a sense of humanity being celebrated in the theatre. It gives us hope for tomorrow and it's just infectious. You can't watch Revelations and be sad.”

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Programme 1: Wednesday 23 – Friday 25 August; Programme 2: Thursday 24 – Friday 25 August.

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