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Lost music from Alvin Ailey's unabridged version of 'Revelations' inspired this ballet coming to Berkeley

Ailey's "Revelations" may be the most hailed masterpiece of modern dance. A new ballet from the late choreographer's dance company pays homage to the piece's original, never-recorded 1960 production.

By: Andrew Gilbert

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More than 35 years after his death, Alvin Ailey still has revelations to share.

With its opening "I Been Buked" tableau of arms stretching up to heaven, the choreographer's iconic ballet "Revelations" is arguably the most beloved and frequently performed work in the modern dance canon. It turns out that the 30-minute version of the ballet that concludes most Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) performances is only half of the story.

When the piece premiered in 1960, "Revelations" ran for an hour, accompanied by live performances of spirituals and gospel. While quickly recognized as a masterpiece, Ailey had to distill the ballet a couple of years later to make it portable. That's the version seen by millions of people around the world and that generations of Berkeley public school students have experienced via Cal Performances' SchoolTime matinees.

"When it was time to take 'Revelations' on the road, there was no way he could tour such a large work," said Matthew Rushing, AAADT's interim artistic director. "He recorded the music and condensed the piece to the version we know today."

Rushing came across the original description of "Revelations" in Jennifer Dunning's great [biography Alvin Ailey: A Life In Dance](#) in the months before the start of the pandemic when he was researching the work's history for its 60th anniversary celebration. The pandemic put the kibosh on that project, but after finding tremendous comfort in the lost music from "Revelations" he set out to create "[Sacred Songs](#)," which makes its Bay Area premiere as part of the [AAADT's annual Cal Performances residency](#) at 2 p.m. on Wednesday, April 9, and Saturday, April 12.

With no film of the original 1960 production remains — the earliest extant footage is from 1962, when the company first took the revised "Revelations" on tour — Rushing had something of a blank canvas. He started with the goal of "staying far away from anything that would remind anyone of 'Revelations,' whether it was movement, or symbols or images," he said.

He made subtle changes, like using a black floor rather than the grey floor that Ailey set "Revelations" on. Working with musical director Du'Bois A'Keen, he created a very different sound, setting the sacred songs to jazz, calypso, R&B and rock. And for costumes, he went for a look that evoked the Hebrew Bible themes of the spirituals "mixed with a contemporary sensibility, so 'Sacred Songs' would look different from 'Revelations,'" he said.



But when it came the dance itself, despite his initial determination to create an entirely independent ballet, "you feel something else takes over and you can't fight it," he said. "I was referencing movement and themes not just from 'Revelations,' but other masterpieces Mr. Ailey had choreographed. I decided I'm going to go with the artistic flow, and it ended up having all kinds of references."

Like any dancer who stays in the AAADT for more than a few years, Rushing's relationship with "Revelations" runs deep. The ballet plays a particular role in the company as dancers move through the ranks. "It's a work you have an



intimate relationship with that matures and shifts and changes, even within the structure of how you're cast," said Rushing, a Los Angeles native who joined the company in 1992.

New members are automatically put into "I've Been Boked," he explained. Male dancers of a certain height will be cast carrying the poles in "Wade In the Water" and as the yellow-clad dancers in the concluding "Rocka My Soul In the Bosom of Abraham."

"If you stay, you kind of graduate to other roles in the work," he said. "As you mature, your experience with the ballet also evolves. For anyone who has danced 'Revelations,' it's like you're in a relationship. You both age and as a result your relationship changes. It took eight years until I was cast in 'Wade In the Water.'"

The enduring popularity of "Revelations" means that AAADT includes the dance on almost every program. Only one performance during the Cal Performances residency — Program B on Wednesday, April 9 — doesn't conclude with the iconic dance. On Program D, the matinee on Saturday, April 12, "Sacred Songs" opens the performance and "Revelations" closes it (with the Bay Area premiere of Lar Lubovitch's "Many Angeles" in between), putting the two works into direct dialogue.

That's not Rushing's favorite way to program the piece, "but it was meant to continue the conversation," he said. "'Revelations' is classic, meaning I feel it's timeless. It will always have an impact simply because it speaks to humanity. Lamentation, the call of faith, joy, communal celebration, these are emotions and situations evoked so deeply by Mr. Ailey, it will continue to speak to present and future generations."



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