

VailDaily

Ailey II kicks off winter dance program at Vilar

Emerging dance talent and choreographers blend passion, creativity and energy while showcasing the next

generation of dance

By: Kimberly Nicoletti

January 13, 2026



When Alvin Ailey launched Ailey II in 1974, he did it with a pioneering eye to showcase diversity. It's now one of the most renowned modern dance companies, with artistic director Francesca Harper infusing fresh perspectives into Ailey's legacy. Ailey II blends the energy of some of the nation's best rising dance talent with the creative visions of today's most innovative choreographers. Thursday, they showcase four works at the Vilar Performing Arts Center in Beaver Creek.

The evening begins with Rena Butler's "In Session," which debuted just last year. Featuring the whole company with soloists taking center stage at times, it highlights a school setting, with both slow, controlled movements and energetic, fast-paced choreography and acrobatics.

"I've found this to be very unique," said choreographer Renée I. McDonald, who choreographed Thursday night's third piece, "Like Vs. Life," in 2025. "I find that each piece has its own identity. You can really see that each choreographer has their own identity, their own style. Everybody's bringing something fresh and unique and different to the table. We're using space differently, we're using costuming differently, we're using music differently, and so it really is a pleasure to watch how these different choreographers can be working with the same dancers in the same space and producing such different end pieces."



This is her second piece for Ailey II, and even though this time around, she's working with a completely set of dancers, she still describes them as "absolutely excellent."

"Coming into the space, I had no reason to change anything that I wanted to do because of anyone's inability to do it. The dancers are beautiful. They're super-well trained. They are technicians, but they also are performers. A lot of my piece requires them to do a bit of acting and a bit of vulnerability when it comes down to performing from within, and they're really committed to that," she said. "They're really professional; it was a pleasure to work with them."

Her approximately 12-minute piece features a trio of dancers. Sometimes they stand side by side, mindlessly scrolling with their hands, as if there's a big screen in front them, reacting and then mindlessly going on with their lives. Other times, the movement turns more abstract.

"Sometimes I find myself watching a film, getting lost in the music," she said about the music in the piece, adding her relationship with social media also helped inspire the work. "I'm currently on a social media break. For quite some time, I've been battling with social media and how it makes me feel and some of the topics that arise as a result of social media like comparison, depression, anxiety and so on. My actual experience with social media has informed my vocabulary. There are sections like double tapping, swiping and scrolling that pop into the piece here and there, but the music really inspired the moments because I value musicality a lot. The music is telling me what to do when and how in a way that's really organic for me, but it's still very grounded in vocabulary that's trying to tell a specific story that is coming from a very personal place in me."

"Third Person Point of View," by choreographer My'Kal Stromile also features a trio of dancers, this time predominately dancing to piano music, as opposed to scores for movies. They weave, intertwine and travel through space using various patterns and lines, sometimes morphing into pairs.

“We’re bringing different flavors of contemporary,” McDonald said, commenting on the hip-hop, classical and other genres within the performance.

Ailey’s great “Revelations,” which debuted in 1960, remains true to his original vision, which includes a high-energy male trio, a more mellow solo, a slow duet and more.



“It’s a real honor to be sharing a bill with Mr. Ailey’s work,” McDonald said. “‘Revelations’ is an absolutely iconic, classic piece. They’re bringing that real modern dance and American culture to the stage alongside what the younger, emerging dancers are bringing to the table in terms of the fresh perspective of this generation being juxtaposed with the absolutely timeless work of Mr. Ailey. Just watching the show unfold as you’re taken on this journey of different voices and different ideas and different genres and different styles, it’s a beautiful experience. It’s rooted in African American culture, celebrated through modern dance.”