

Ailey's BAM season centers inspiring power of the human spirit

By: Zita Allen

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A sure sign of summer is the [Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre's appearance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music \(BAM\)](#), June 4–7 this year, with a program that celebrates the transcendence of the human body and spirit with works that include Ailey's timeless masterpiece, "Revelations," the ultimate anthem to resilience and joy that has moved and uplifted fans for decades. Also included is "Hymn," the Emmy-Award winning 1993 tribute to the company's founder, choreographed by its legendary star and Ailey's successor, the late [Judith Jamison](#). Medhi Walerski's "Blink of an Eye," with its stunningly deft display of athleticism set to J.S. Bach's compelling fast-paced violin sonatas and partita, rounds out the evening.

AAADT Artistic Director [Alicia Graf Mack](#)'s excitement was palpable as she spoke of the return of "Hymn," Jamison's epic collaboration with the brilliant Anna Deavere Smith. "Now a new generation of dancers and audience members will experience Ms. Jamison's choreography and personal reflections, especially her belief that 'a manifestation of spirit is dance,'" Mack said. "Hymn" is not only a tribute to Alvin Ailey — her mentor and someone who set our world in motion — but a love letter to the Ailey spirit to inspire us all."

Recently, AAADT Associate Artistic Director Matthew Rushing took a break from a hectic rehearsal schedule to discuss the process of breathing life into a work that has not been in the repertory for a few seasons. It is a complicated task, undertaken by an artistic team composed of Rushing and Assistant Rehearsal Directors Clifton Brown and Kanji Segawa who, like him, are former Ailey dancers who have performed Jamison's "Hymn."

Explaining how the restaging process works, Rushing said, "We've provided the company with a number of videos, including a PBS special." The special captures the dynamic mix of Jamison's powerful choreography and Smith's libretto. The libretto, or text, follows a format similar to one Smith used in her award-winning work, "Fires in the Mirror," which centered the diverse voices of residents of a Brooklyn community that was the site of a 1991 race riot. For "Fires," Smith interviewed witnesses and captured the distinct voices of folks affected by that traumatic event. For "Hymn," Smith used a similar process, interviewing the AAADT's 31 members, as well as Jamison and then-Associate Director Masazumi Chaya. She created a sensitive and heartfelt libretto centering the voices of dancers who are, essentially, members of an extended family. Through them, she captured the pain of loss and the power of the spirit that drives this phenomenal company.

The libretto serves as a compelling accompaniment to Jamison's brilliant choreographic tribute to the spirit of the man who, in many ways, remains, along with Jamison, the guiding light of AAADT and of the dancers it inspires. The result is, according to one critic, "a piece filled with surging patterns and cathartic expressions of joy and sorrow, that enables its performers to reflect on their careers and lives in new ways." In other words, a piece that is a tribute to Jamison, Ailey, and AAADT.

"Judith Jamison has been my North Star from the time I was a young dreamer with a poster of her in my bedroom, to when I joined the company 20 years ago as a dancer, and continuing now as I've stepped into the role of artistic director and caretaker of the Ailey legacy," said Mack. "She not only spoke about the responsibility of being an Ailey dancer — she lived it. Through her poise, her grace, and her grit, she embodied a standard of excellence for all of us to emulate and uphold."

Rushing agreed, saying that remounting “Hymn” is a series of revelations and that the process has revealed a matrix of references to both geniuses. “The emotions and the connection to the essence of the work didn’t start to hit until we got into the studio,” Rushing said, recalling the rehearsal process with Brown and Segawa. “We were constantly saying, ‘Well, Judy always said this,’ or ‘Judy picked that movement from Mr. Ailey,’ or ‘This movement is a reference to “Revelations,” or ‘That part comes from ‘Blues Suite.’ There was one moment when I said, ‘Oh, my gosh, I didn’t realize what this piece encompasses — it’s actually legacy in motion.’ For instance, there’s a moment where a dance step requires the dancers to take their hand and with a grabbing gesture to reach up to the sky. We told the dancers, ‘Judy told us that this movement mirrored the idea of holding an umbrella.’ When I said that, I realized, ‘It’s the umbrella from the ‘Wade in the Water’ section of ‘Revelations.’ There are just so many references to Mr. Ailey’s blood memories from his choreography and what he believed in. It’s amazing. It revealed how much of a tribute this piece really is. It’s brilliant, absolutely brilliant.”

Not wanting to overlook the other exciting works in the program, Rushing turned to Waterski’s “Blink of an Eye” and added, “It’s a short program, but a really full one. This piece represents where dance is today. It also shows the versatility of the dancers — that we are modern dancers, we are classically trained dancers, we are dancers who are well-versed in social dances, and we are also dancers who can perform contemporary work. Then, as the program ends with Mr. Ailey’s ‘Revelations,’ it embodies his blood memories, his roots in a program that reflects a bold company and organization that leads us into the future.”

In fact, Rushing said the BAM audience should come away with a strong sense of the Alvin Ailey he knew: the man who “talked about the beauty and the elegance of Black people, a beauty and elegance that can be felt by all people.” Of course, he added, “it’s important to realize that Ailey started the AAADT for a specific reason — for his own people, while also knowing the things art can do to highlight our shared humanity, which shows up when different people from different walks of life come together and enjoy art. That in itself is unifying.”