

Religion and Social Order in Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*

In a time when America was gradually being redefined as ethnically diverse, Alvin Ailey played a vital role in carrying this progression into the dance world. He introduced African-American history to the world through a company created to make a social and political statement. Ailey's goal in creating the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) was to remind other choreographers of the beauty and elegance of black people (Ailey 1986). He focused his choreography on the African-Americans' struggle for freedom and opportunity. The first step towards accomplishing these goals was achieved through *Revelations*, first choreographed and performed in 1960 and edited in 1986. Ailey drew upon his own memories – blood memories, as he called them – to create *Revelations*. Because religion and social order were so prevalent in Ailey's life and the world at the time, they were clearly illustrated in this work. Through this work of art, Ailey uses choreography, music, color, dancers' emotions, and costume design to convey concepts of religion and social order.

According to DeFrantz, *Revelations* tells the story of African-Americans from slavery to freedom (DeFrantz 1996). The piece has three distinct sections, which are: "Pilgrim of Sorrow," "Take me to the Water," and "Move, Members, Move." According to Ailey, "Pilgrim of Sorrow" symbolizes the African-Americans hope and prayers to escape their situation in the South, "Take me to the Water" brings to life a baptismal, and "Move, Members, Move" illustrates a Sunday morning at church (Ailey 1986).

The first section, "Pilgrim of Sorrow," illustrates the legacy of slavery. Within this section, there are three songs: "I've Been Buked," "Didn't my Lord Deliver Daniel,"

and “Fix Me, Jesus.” The entire piece conveys social order by describing the African-Americans’ emotions towards slavery. African-American religion is captured with the movements and the three songs, which are spirituals and gospels. The lyrics in all three songs match the message – all are pleas to God to save them from their suffering. Much of the movement in this section possesses the downward energy characteristic of African dance, which symbolizes a connection to the earth (Blanco 2008).

“I’ve Been Buked” has a total of nine dancers, all of whom have somber expressions on their faces throughout this dance. According to DeFrantz, this part depicts a group prayer (DeFrantz 1996), which is conveyed by the clustered formations of the dancers. This dance also embodies the collective pain African-Americans felt as enslaved people, and illustrates how they are united by this suffering and dependence on God despite being spread all over the world. The lyrics emphasize this point, saying “I’ve been Buked” and “there is trouble all over this world.” The sadness and seriousness of the situation is conveyed through earth-toned colors; there is brown and black lighting and dark-brown costumes. The costumes are also very plain – sleeveless tank tops and gaucho pants, with no design or unique characteristics.

The dancers begin in unison and alternate from deep stances with bent knees and heads facing downwards to reaching and looking upwards. Throughout this piece, when the dancers stretch their arms upwards, it represents reaching for God. As the dance progresses, the dancers repeatedly break out of the mass in the center and then come back together. When they are in the group, their dancing is synchronized. The dancers do slow rotations of the upper body while reaching upwards, alternating with deep stances with their heads facing downwards. When the group breaks apart, the dancers dance their

own sequences. While there is still reaching upwards during these sequences, the movements are faster, filled with spins and kicks. There are also fast level changes, with the dancers ending their spins kneeling on the ground or contracting over their legs. This contrast between synchronization and individuality symbolizes how African-Americans are unified despite the distance separating them from each other and from their home. More specifically, the group dancing together symbolizes how African-Americans are joined together by culture and prayer. The group breaking apart and the dancers dancing independently symbolizes the physical distance between them. One pose that they hold has six dancers, three on each side, mirroring each other, holding hands, lunging, and bent over at the waist. In the center, a woman is holding her leg behind her, almost parallel to the ground, while holding the hands of two dancers closest to her. There is also one dancer lying on the ground in the center in front of the woman holding her leg up. A male dancer is also in the back, posing with his leg behind him, bent at the knee, forming a 90 degree angle to the ground. This beautiful pose shows that African-Americans are all connected and supporting one another, physically and emotionally.

The next section, "Take Me to the Water," revives a baptismal, which Ailey said he choreographed based on his own personal baptismal. He was baptized outside of a church in a lake, all dressed in white (Ailey 1986). All of the dancers in this section are dressed completely in white, just like Alvin Ailey was on the day of his baptism. In African culture, the color white symbolizes cleanliness, purity, and ancestors (Blanco 2008). Thus, since the baptized individual is being cleansed and reborn, it makes sense to dress her in white. The lighting is also very bright, and the overall color of this section is a stark contrast to that of "Pilgrim of Sorrow." The dresses worn by the women in this

section are also very different, much more flowing, elegant, and stylish than the costumes worn in the first section. This was done to demonstrate the beauty and joy surrounding the occasion. There is an overall feeling of excitement and celebration throughout this part. This entire section, "Take Me to the Water," communicates ideas of religion by bringing to life a baptismal experience.

The first piece of this section, "Processional/Honor, Honor," begins with a beat, unlike the rest of the dances thus far in *Revelations*. It starts with much more excitement, both in the music and the choreography. The beat is comprised solely of voices and drums, and lasts for a significant portion of the piece. A man and woman spin onstage to the drumbeat, entering from stage right. Their arms are bent at the elbows, with their hands up. The man holds a stick with white ribbons attached to it in his right hand, with a long white cloth in his left hand. When he reaches downstage left, the man lifts his left hand up. The momentum of this movement makes it appear as if the white cloth jumps, which gives a feeling of excitement and celebration. The woman wears a long dress, which billows and fans out gracefully as she spins, appearing as if it dances along with her. Once onstage, the woman spins with her leg out behind her in a 90 degree angle to the ground, again causing the dress to fan out. Her arms spread open, and it appears as if she is flying, which captures the joy of the occasion. With a burst of energy, she kicks and leans back when she finishes the fast spin, relishing the extension. She smoothly walks backwards towards stage left with arms outstretched, welcoming the second man and woman who spin onstage towards her awaiting arms. The entering man and woman spin and stop at center stage, facing downstage left. They clasp their hands together in front of their chests and contract forward and release. They continue this movement

while simultaneously walking towards stage left. Suddenly, two men with long poles adorned with ribbons and a woman with a white umbrella run in, circling the dancers already onstage. This mix of movements on stage establishes a celebratory atmosphere, setting the stage for the ensuing baptism.

All seven dancers soon stop to face downstage left in the formation of a triangle. The three men on the edges of the triangles have their arms and poles in the air, whereas the two women and the man in the center of the triangle have their hands clasped in front of their chests. Everyone looks upwards, as if communicating with their God. They walk back and forth in unison, only moving their legs and rotating their hips – the hips becoming the focus of the movement, and alluding to characteristics of African dance where the hips are said to represent fertility and life (Blanco 2008). As this section celebrates a baptism, it is only fitting for Ailey to draw on legacies of African dance to show the beginning of a new spiritual life.

After a second set of hip rotations, the dancers break apart and half of them leave the stage, leaving one woman and three men on the stage, forming a trapezoid with the two men with poles in the back and the woman and man in the front. The back two and front two dancers take turns doing turns with their legs behind them in 90 degree angles. They finish their turn by dipping their upper bodies forward, causing their back leg to extend higher. This set of movements continues the celebratory mood of the dance.

Two women and a man are in the center of the stage in the formation of a triangle. The woman at the tip of the triangle holds the white umbrella. They spin forward and the man and woman in the front reach upwards and throw their heads back. Next, they contract and bend their knees, throwing their upper body forwards and parallel to their

ground. A split second later, they straighten their knees and use their hands to gesture as if they were climbing up a wall, with their palms pressed against the invisible wall. This symbolizes how humans sin and fall from God, but because of His mercy, are able to climb back up again and receive forgiveness.

Two of the male dancers bring in a white sheet, which symbolizes cleanliness and purity (Blanco 2008). The two male dancers hold the sheet horizontally, and the other three dancers stand behind it, with their arms reaching up. The music changes and becomes slow and more serious, and the dancers rotate their upper bodies and arms, matching the rhythm of the music. Although the baptism is a joyous, exciting occasion, it is also serious since they make their commitment to God official. For the last few seconds of the piece, the music switches back to upbeat, finishing the section festively.

The last section, “Move, Members, Move,” takes place on a Sunday morning at church. According to DeFrantz, this scene takes place in a “very specific place in a Texas church, (DeFrantz 1996)” close to where Alvin Ailey grew up. Although the church is different now, this section keeps the scene respective to the ‘30s and ‘40s when Alvin Ailey was attending church with his mother (Croft 2006). This section conveys to the audience the intense joy that God and religion bring to African-Americans, and how much they enjoy worshiping their God. The music in this section is upbeat, fast, and cheerful. The last dance in this section, “Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham” is the big bang finale of *Revelations*.

“Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham” is a fun, joyous dance with nine women and nine men. The men and women are paired into couples in the beginning of the dance, with the women sitting on stools and the men kneeling next to the women.

The dancers are all dressed in their Sunday best. The women are dressed in beautiful yellow dresses and hats with flowers on them, with matching fans. The men are wearing white dress shirts, gold and black vests, black dress pants, and black dress shoes. This section is unique because the dancers appear to be very free and blissful, smiling the entire time. Towards the middle of the dance, the women stand in a diagonal line from downstage left to upstage right and they dance in unison. They first skip forwards, fanning themselves, and then do two fan kicks on alternating legs, moving backwards. They are very energetic and constantly jump during these movements. Following this, the men begin to come forward in a line, and one of the women dances in the center, rotating her fan while bending her knees, spinning, and reaching up with her fan. Another woman joins her, spinning. While she spins, she raises her arms over her head and rotates her neck. These two women dance independently and appear to be improvising and just having fun, celebrating life and dancing out of happiness. Towards the end of the dance, the entire cast comes together and begins dancing together. The men stand in the front, in a “W” shape, and the women stand behind them in the same formation. They bend their knees and point upwards and diagonally, alternating from right to left. The bent knees, bouncing, and pointing signifies a celebration of God. The dance ends with spinning, and the entire cast ends on their knees with their arms straight over their head in a “V”, in veneration. When the final sections of “Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham” are repeated as an encore, it certainly emphasizes the importance of religion to African-Americans in the past and present, and the spiritual wholeness that it brought to them. The repetition communicates to the audience that religion is

significant in all aspects of their lives, helping them survive through slavery and its aftermath.

As a whole, Alvin Ailey believes that *Revelations* was a great work because of how personal it was (Ailey 1986). This is supported by the fact that despite changes and edits throughout the years, *Revelations* has kept emotion at its core, eliciting emotional connections from its audience and its dancers. DeFrantz writes that “even though the technique is so heightened, the audience still has a sense of a person doing it and not a dancer who’s just a technician (Croft 2006).” The dancers are able to convey the emotional messages of the piece to the audience by drawing on their own experiences. Matthew Rushing, who is a 12-year member of AAADT, says that he “loves his role in ‘Wade in the Water’ ...because it allows him to tap his own spirituality (Croft 2006).” He claims that “if I continue to bring my life experience to the stage in *Revelations*, then it will never grow old. I’m not the same person I was last year, so the ballet should feel different too (Croft 2006).” The dancers have kept *Revelations* alive and have helped it evolve by bringing their own experiences to it.

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