Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture

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DANCING REVELATIONS

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To Alvin Ailey, who speaks to us all, still.
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A friend asked me if I liked Ailey’s work; I blanched at the question. I could not have spent years thinking through Ailey’s achievement, hunkered over newspaper clippings and programs in an airless room at the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation offices, viewing this work repeatedly on videotape and, thankfully, in live performances, without an enormous admiration and respect for his accomplishment. This study is a testament to that respect.

This study also provides a stabilizing narrative of Ailey’s creative work, one that places him at the center of a consideration of concert dance practice in the United States. Since he showed his first choreography in the 1950s, professional dance critics have consistently found fault with Ailey’s process and product. My project does not involve rehearsing the “problems” in Ailey’s work as a choreographer, nor am I looking for chinks in the armor of a widely celebrated African American cultural institution. Rather, following art historian Richard J. Powell’s summation, I hope to provide an interpretation of Ailey’s work that acknowledges its particular aesthetics and cultural processes in formation “from an a priori position of cultural wholeness, conscious historicity, and an inherent and unapologetic humanity.” This study follows a lead set by Ailey himself in its variety of approaches and propositions about the place of concert dance in contemporary African American life.

Above all, Ailey was aware of his position and potential as an African American man born in working-class, segregated, Depression-era Texas. To understand Ailey’s achievement, we must look to the world he inherited and the degrees to which he transformed that world through his work. I do not compare Ailey’s work to that of Martha Graham, George Balanchine, or Merce Cunningham as if Ailey, like them, had been born into an educated, middle-class white milieu. If Ailey made dances that were important to him, we must be willing to look to the particular cultural processes and social realities that inspired him. Ailey’s dances may speak to a wide, global audience, but they speak from an African American ethos that remains insubstantially documented.

Ailey choreographed more than seventy-five works, most of which exist in the repertories of one or more dance companies or have been videotaped and archived at the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center. I consider underlying compositional structures in relation to the overall dance event. To better understand the role of interaction between Ailey and his dancers, I have paid close attention to published interviews, oral histories, and televised accounts given by dancers who have both worked with Ailey and danced his choreographies. In addition, I conducted several interviews with former Ailey company dancers.

The study is organized according to the parallel development of Ailey’s choreographic themes and his company. Theoretical concerns are developed in reference to particular dance works or performances. Of special significance to this study are modifications Ailey effected to his own choreography. For example, Revelations, his signature work, has endured three distinct guises in its nearly forty-year history. An analysis of changes in its appearance points to changes in Ailey’s conception of his company and its purpose as a bearer of African American culture.
I take the time to describe several of Ailey’s works so that the reader might sense what I see as I appreciate these compositions. The limits of movement description may become readily apparent, but I find this technique useful, especially to discussions of work long gone or not easily accessible to a general audience. The descriptions also intend to give the impression of how these dances “feel” to a dance researcher at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

I rely on critical accounts contemporary to the premieres of Ailey’s choreography for at least two reasons: to provide the reader with a sense of what writers present at performances chose to document of their immediate opinions of Ailey’s work, and to offer a sense of the strangely consistent degradation Ailey suffered at the pens of some of those critics. This study does not concern itself primarily with the divide between the largely white New York dance critics cohort and Ailey’s largely African American company and aesthetic interest. But that divide surely did exist, and according to Ailey’s allies, the virulent attacks writers routinely launched against his enterprise troubled him deeply. Certainly, negative critical opinions of Ailey’s choreography or company are not intentionally racist simply because they come from white writers; at times, negative opinions from any quarter are helpful to the process of improving performance. But, as the several examples of negative criticism in the manuscript that follow bear out, many of Ailey’s (white) critics engaged a purposefully dismissive and derisive tone that deserves more explication than this text allows.

In addition to historical analysis, the manuscript includes a series of short, self-contained essays that constitute a counternarrative to the main body of writing. I intend for these breaks to resonate with black musical practice, in which an insistent beat is interrupted by a flash of contradictory rhythmic ideas. For me, the break is the most significant gesture of African American performance, as it contains both the tie to a ubiquitous rhythmic flow and the potential for complete anarchy and disruption. The break creates a liminoid space that allows listeners a place to enter the musical dance. I hope that the manuscript’s literary breaks will function similarly to periodically revive the interests of readers who become bored with the cataloguing of Ailey’s life work.

This manuscript veers toward academic language at times, but attempts to resist staying there for long. Following Ailey’s lead, my effort questions the nature of the political and aesthetic in dance performance, but in language that might be widely understood. My hope is that this manuscript might reach anyone who has enjoyed a performance by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and inspire that reader to think more deeply about the ways that performance has grown from a rich and fertile African American ground.
This manuscript has benefited from numerable influences, direct and indirect. I thank everyone who offered encouragement and criticism along the way. I thank the faculty of the Department of Performance Studies at New York University, especially Professor James N. Amankulor, who constantly reminded me to write within the African American grain and to honor all the deities—plus one more. Marcia B. Siegel shared of herself again and again to push me toward thinking critically and carefully about dance and its affect. Simply put, she is without peer as a critic and mentor.

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Introduction

Alvin Ailey (1931–89) is arguably the most important black American choreographer in the short history of modern dance. He created a body of dance works that shaped African American participation in American modern dance during the thirty-year period before his death. The company he founded in 1958, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, has grown from a small pick-up company of seven or eight dancers to a large, carefully managed, internationally renowned enterprise including several ensembles of dancers and a thriving school. This study of Ailey’s dances illuminates the dual achievement of Ailey as an artist and as an arts activist committed to developing an African American presence in concert dance.

As my title suggests, I propose that Ailey encoded aspects of African American life and culture in concert dance. These “aspects”—aesthetic imperatives termed “Africanisms” by cultural theorists—flourish in the movements of dancers Ailey worked with; they are also embedded within the very choreography Ailey made. They emerge in compositional strategies, choices of music, structuring of performance, casting, and approach to company operations. This study explores particular examples of how Ailey captured black experience in terms of concert dance.

Ailey’s choreographic work and company outreach operations, however, do
not encompass a universal “whole” of black experience. As cultural theorist Paul Gilroy has argued, there are no “homogenous and unchanging” black communities whose political and economic interests are “readily knowable and easily transferred from everyday life into their expressive cultures.” Ailey’s work does not substitute itself for African American cultural processes, nor does his company’s success offer a peremptory model for the creation and dissemination of performing arts in the African American grain. This volume considers how Alvin Ailey achieved his particular status as an icon in dance, and how he managed to link that status to his cultural motivations and interests.

Ailey’s formal training began at Lester Horton’s Hollywood studio in 1949. Horton had created a theater and school committed to dances performed by his own multiracial company, which included later Ailey associates Carmen de Lavallade, Don Martin, Joyce Trisler, and James Truitte. Horton’s brand of modern dance was based on his personal interpretation of techniques he researched from traditions of Asian, Native American, and African diaspora cultures. Horton stressed the essentials of stage design, music awareness, costuming, and storytelling in his choreography, and the performance style he taught at the school was strictly theatrical.

Ailey began his dance career in the incredibly optimistic New York dance world of the 1950s, an era marked by a seemingly contradictory modern dance mandate of personalized dance expression within an accessible, theatrical style. A background in explicitly theatrical dance allowed him the latitude to explore the expressive potential of several choreographic techniques. His output includes ballets on pointe, modern dance works, and staging for musical theater pieces. His dances privilege no form over another, stressing instead a facile interplay among genres. His theatrical tastes, combined with a variety of technique training undertaken at the Horton School, the Dunham School, and in classes taught by Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey, Anna Sokolow, and Charles Weidman, contributed to a playful sense of movement-style juxtaposition in several works. Blues Suite (1958), for example, contains sections of early twentieth-century social dances, Horton dance technique, Jack Cole-inspired jazz dance, and ballet partnering. This study assumes, above all, that the fluidity Ailey indulged in his artistry and company practices stem from African diaspora aesthetic practices brought to bear on the enterprise of professional American concert dance.

Long before Ailey’s work could be interpreted as an embodiment of African American culture, modern dance had been an expressive form nurtured by individuals for the collective soul of a gathered audience. In the 1930s and 1940s dancers and choreographers Pearl Primus, Asadata Dafora, and Katherine Dunham realized that African American cultural values emphasize the participatory nature of performance. For them, theatrical dance offered a way into the artistic imagination of black people grappling with the legacy of colonialisn encounter. The concert stage provided a point of entry to a dialogue about dual processes of entertainment and enlightenment, expressed in terms of modern dance.

Building on the work of these black choreographers and company directors,
Alvin Ailey’s company stretched the boundaries of the audience that can effectively share in the experience of modern dance. According to one estimate, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has been seen by some 15 million people worldwide. Still, the company draws from an African American wellspring through strategies of personnel recruitment and base operations in New York, Baltimore, and Kansas City. This feat of vast appeal, sustained across two generations of American modern dance, is discussed here in terms of its relationship to Ailey’s choreography and its performance.

This study also examines how concert dance performance conveys meaning to its audience, considering bodily communication and the expressivity of gesture. Ailey’s choreographic success stems from his ability to communicate effectively with a broad audience. His dances confirm the durability of particular Africanist aesthetics, including a reliance on individual invention in the moment—the “flash of the spirit”—and call-and-response connection to the gathered audience. Ailey’s dances also offer vibrant examples of a choreographic method concerned with structure and style. Although he never repeated himself in terms of musical selection, costuming, or mise-en-scène, the whole of his output holds pronounced structural similarities. A careful look at Ailey’s range of choreography illuminates how he intended to speak to his audiences and what sorts of stories he felt compelled to tell.

As a financially solvent arts organization cited repeatedly for its artistic excellence, the Ailey company holds special importance for concert dance worldwide. Continuing vigorously into the twenty-first century as a healthy multi-million-dollar operation inflected as incontrovertibly “black,” the company offers a valuable model for the consideration of expressive commerce and creativity in black American life. Shrewd business management combined with an extraordinary artistic product have allowed the operation to achieve unprecedented celebrity as dance ambassadors steeped in African American cultural processes and available to a world audience. The company holds an even greater iconic status among portions of its black audiences, enacting “the custodianship of the racial group’s most intimate self-identity.” As in cultural theorist Paul Gilroy’s formulation of the Black Atlantic, Ailey company performances make explicit “hidden links between blacks” even as they ground “an oppositional aesthetic constituted around our phenotypical difference from ‘white’ ideals of beauty and a concept of the body in motion which is the residue of our African cultures.” Ailey’s choreography reveals beauty as a structural component of African American creative expression in dance gestures recognized and supported by both an international black audience and others.

Ailey’s choreography offers vibrant examples of black subjectivity on public stages. His dances and dancers repeatedly engage the “act of being black” as they enact Africanist performance imperatives outlined in 1966 by Robert Farris Thompson, including percussive attack, apart-playing, call-and-response, multiple meter, and an overall “cool” demeanor. Looking at Ailey’s choreography, I am mindful of dance theorist Susan Foster’s observation that “traditional dance studies . . . have privileged the thrill of the vanished performance over the
enduring impact of the choreographic intent.” Although this volume documents the whole of Ailey’s choreographic output, it does not intend to whet an appetite for performances long gone. Instead, it considers the overall impact of Ailey’s method to stage a black body as “capable of generating ideas . . . a body that initiates as well as responds,” to stage African American culture as a paradigm capable of representing high modernity. Indeed, Ailey’s choreography and company operations offer a sweeping variety of roles and personas for black bodies and African American culture onstage, in the audience, in the classroom, and behind the scenes.

Performance theory invites an evaluation of Ailey’s choreography not simply as dance artifact, but as the focus of a larger experience. For instance, Ailey’s dances infuse the Western-defined concert dance event with African-inspired participation. Different audiences experience Ailey’s work in substantially different ways, and in much of his choreography Ailey exploited the tension between his audience’s expectations and his dancers’ abilities. This compositional strategy emerged as a cornerstone of a system of performance that challenged both a core African American audience and cultural outsiders. Ailey’s choreographic themes, phrase structuring, uses of music, character, and narrative can be understood in terms of their efforts to create a multifaceted representation of African American experience.

Beyond choreographic analysis, this volume employs a number of analytical prisms through which to consider Ailey’s achievement. I propose that these several perspectives interweave in practice, that it is pointless to consider Ailey’s choreography solely as an arrangement of physical motion, or as a representation of gender or sexuality, or as a depiction of beauty or class mobility, or as an arrangement of popular youth narratives. Ailey’s choreography and company operations offer an unusual nodule of everyday American politics in internationally recognized aesthetic action. No single, or indeed double way of looking at performances by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater sustains primacy for long. For example, just when Revelations seems to be telling a story of ethnic faith as movement abstraction in its first section, the work shifts to physically enact a waterside baptism, explicitly Christian in principle but Afro-Caribbean in practice. At this point, gender emerges as a sure organizing feature of the dance, as a female devotional leader with an umbrella orchestrates the baptism, but the theatricality of expansive blue silk “waterways” intrudes on the reading of the sexes. For a time, the audience is asked to consider the global circulation of theatrical convention, as the silk streams, clearly borrowed from certain Asian theater traditions, reflect Ailey’s initial theater training in California. And surely the musical choices in this dance alone offer a methodology for mapping African American culture through time, in their various vocal arrangements and instrumental accompaniments. Revelations must also be considered in terms of its material performance, that is, how audiences witnessing the work imagine it to embody African American experience, and how that impression forecloses its expressive possibilities.

This analysis places Ailey’s work at the center of an Africanist aesthetic of
dance making that emerged with the civil rights movement in the 1960s, an aesthetic that has defined “blackness” as surely as it has reflected its qualities and encouraged others to consider them. The financially solvent Ailey company stands as testament to the commercial viability of an African American aesthetic in the performing arts. This study lays out how the Ailey legacy contains cultural signposts that consistently renew performance.
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This suite explores motivations and emotions of Negro religious music which, like its heir, the Blues, takes many forms — “true spirituals” with their sustained melodies, ring-shouts, song-sermons, gospel songs, and holy blues — songs of trouble, of love, of deliverance.

— Ailey program note, Kaufmann Concert Hall YM-YWHA, 31 January 1960

Revelations 1962

Alvin Ailey intended for Revelations (31 January 1960) to be the second part of a larger, evening-length survey of African American music that would “show the coming and the growth and reach of black culture.” Designed to suggest a chronological spectrum of black religious music from the sorrow songs to gospel rock, Revelations mapped rural southern spirituality onto the concert dance stage.

For years American modern dance had searched for ways to connect with an expanded general audience. Ailey’s dance confirmed that folk materials, carefully mediated by principles of modern dance composition, could retain the immediacy of their sources in the transformation to concert dance. The largest implications of Ailey’s success for concert dance lay in the expansion of the audience that could enjoy its performance and the expansion of themes available to choreographers working in this idiom.

Determined to draw a lasting portrait of certain historical markers of African American culture, Ailey chose for Revelations the spirituals, or sorrow songs. Among the most prominent creations of nineteenth-century African American folk and the “prototype music of black religion” that evolved from black rebellion, spirituals release a central passion for freedom subversively contained in simple texts of Bible stories. Rampant with intimations of “liberation
—spiritual liberation in most, physical liberation in the rest,” the texts of spirituals typically align body control with power, escape, and liturgical rhetoric. For example, “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?” poses a rhetorical question of impending salvation: If God delivered Daniel from the lion’s den, won’t He deliver me from slavery? Performances of “Wade in the Water” in slave society commonly signaled an impending escape by way of a nearby riverbank, the water “troubled” by the Underground Railroad for safe passage. Discussed by scholars as the unquestionable “archetype of protest seen later in antislavery, social gospel, and civil rights hymnody,” spirituals approach a fundamental theme of “the need for a change in the existing order.”

Ailey certainly perceived this “need for a change” in terms of concert dance practice in New York City at the time he made Revelations. Few options existed for trained dancers of African descent who wanted to express musicality and corporeal memories of dance as a shared communal process. The one-night-only performance “seasons” of artists such as Talley Beatty, Geoffrey Holder, and Donald McKayle in New York City provided precious opportunities cherished by artists and audiences alike, but no institution existed to nurture a dance tradition that could effectively honor the musical stature of the spirituals. Ailey, in making Revelations, hoped to fill this void.

At its premiere, Revelations included sixteen selections, a live chorus of singers including two onstage soloists, and a running time of over an hour. Sections later excised were “Weeping Mary” and “Poor Pilgrim,” both solos for singer Nancy Redi; “Round about the Mountain,” a woman’s trio; “Wonder Where,” a solo for dancer Merle Derby; “Morning Star,” a women’s quartet; “My Lord What a Morning,” sung by the chorus; and gospel versions of “Precious Lord,” “God a Mighty,” and the finale “Elijah Rock!”

Ailey pared Revelations down to a half hour running time to travel to Jacob’s Pillow dance festival in Lenox, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1961. Filmed for the WCBS-TV television program Lamp Unto My Feet just before the trip to Massachusetts, the dance assumed a fixed form of ten selections in three sections titled “Pilgrim of Sorrow,” “Take Me to the Water,” and “Move, Members, Move!” The following description of the television program broadcast on 4 March 1962 offers a sense of how the dance looked in its first complete form, performed by a trim complement of eight dancers, including Ailey himself. After the detailed description, I look at why Revelations worked and situate it in contemporary African American cultural life.

Described by an off-camera television announcer as a presentation “for those unnamed preachers and anonymous choirs who, from generation to generation, evolve the unique expressions of Christian worship,” the dance begins as a staged enactment of the choral singing of spirituals. A small group of four women and three men stand close in tight choral formation, their heads and bodies bent forward toward the ground. As the tape-recorded choir repeatedly chants “Praise Him” in short, percussive bursts, the dancers raise their heads and sway nervously. They spread their arms wide, palms facing upward, and tilt their heads
back, eyes toward the heavens. Some seem to look for a sign from God, while others search with their eyes closed. They teeter pensively at the waist, with knees bent deep and upper bodies stiff with anticipation. The dancers seem to offer their low-to-the-ground stance as a conduit, to call God down to the earth.

The group disperses as a simple, introductory drumming pattern sounds, and the camera captures four short solos, phrases added, according to dancer James Truitte, for the benefit of the television producer, who needed to fill out the half-hour program. Set to a sorrowful, minor mode hummed figure, these brief excursions are fraught with tension, with angry contractions of the torso suggesting dilemmas of physical oppression and submerged strength. As off-camera voices announce “I’m too tired; I need help; It’s too heavy, Lord; I need so much,” the solo bodies describe spaces of angst.

Finally, the humming is transformed into a cappella singing and the spiritual proper, “I’ve Been ’Buked,” begins. The group reforms its original tight wedge formation to perform a creaky sway and dip to each side connected by a lifting of focus upward. Holding their feet firmly planted in a wide stance, the dancers push their weight downward even as they search the heavens with up-
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turned faces. This image of bodies rooted to the floor while faces are directed upward confirms a choreographic motif of split focus that permeates the dance. These are people in physical bondage invoking, through their movements, spiritual deliverance.

Choreographically, the dance develops in tandem with the spiritual. Movement phrases begin and end with the musical breaths of the choir; as a whole, the staging offers a strict visual correlative to the sung lyrics. While the first verse lyrics tell the story of an individual’s experiences—“I’ve been ‘buked, an’ I’ve been scorned, Children. I’ve been talked about sho’s you’ born”8—its musical setting for mixed chorus suggests a common experience within the large group. The dancers amplify this impression of shared individual experiences through unison passages and sculptural poses suggesting physical exhaustion mirrored by dancers on opposite sides of the stage.

After several brief excursions into the space, the dancers reconvene in the original wedge formation to recover the opening movement phrase, a formal repetition that underscores the cyclical pattern of “‘buking and scorning” historically endured by African Americans. The repetition suggests that no matter how far apart the dancers travel, they must come together physically, as pieces of a larger sculptured mosaic, to complete the communal expression of spirituality. A single variation in staging distinguishes this verse from the opening passage. On the final lyric, “sho’s you’ born,” the dancers perform a brittle and fragmented opening of the arms from overhead, moving downward in random, percussive accents. This striking, jagged motion, unlike any preceding it, suggests the piercing arrival of the Holy Spirit in a sudden, collective gasp for breath. The arms move in abrupt lurches, an outward, limb-driven manifestation of the inward-directed torso contraction featured earlier in the piece. The motion captures the overarching movement theme of split focus: as the arms break through space falling downward, tautly held bodies reach up, with powerfully lifted chests and pained faces focused on the heavens.

The group disperses as the spiritual ends, leaving a man and two women to dance a rhythmic song of deliverance, “Daniel (Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel).” Arranged for choir accompanied by conga drumming, the song alludes to the story of a slave oppressed beyond reason whose salvation confirms the healing powers of faith. Like “I’ve Been ’Buked,” the dance develops as a physical invocation for deliverance, tied equally to the overarching sensibility and substance of the spiritual’s lyric.

Ailey’s choreography is structured as a series of short solos set in counterpoint against a background “base” danced by the two-person ensemble. The solos, roughly one for each dancer, present short vignettes of anguish marked by slow, taut contractions of the torso, urgent head rolls, and restorative leaps through space. The choreography features recurrent imagery of enslavement, as in a gesture with arms brandished overhead and hands held together as if bound at the wrists, while the torso ripples percussively in a physical exaggeration of beating a drum or being flogged at a whipping post. The dance ends with a dramatic unison flourish: lying on their backs, the dancers all stretch one hand up
just as the singers cut off on the last beat of drums. This punchy, off-the-beat ending amplifies an emotional urgency common to the dances of “Pilgrim of Sorrow.”

“Daniel” clarifies a compositional strategy consistent with several sections of Revelations: movement is performed in unison at the beginning of the piece, followed by solo excursions set contrapuntally against movement of a background group, and ended with a unison group effort and a strongly accented pose. This A-B-C-D-A choreographic structure visually enhances the strophic form of the accompanying spirituals. The structure also suggests a call-and-response format, in which the featured soloist’s movement “calls” are “answered” by the group members, who work in a contrasting but interlocking rhythmic pattern. In “Daniel,” for example, slow-motion leaning gestures performed by the background duo provide the rhythmic base for the soloist’s urgent jumps and turns.

“Daniel” is followed by “Fix Me, Jesus,” the central pas de deux of Revelations. A slow, moaning spiritual of supplication, “Fix Me, Jesus” offers extreme musical contrast to “Daniel” in sustained notes, extended out-of-rhythm musical phrases, and a soaring soprano solo. The vocal solo is embodied by the female dancer onstage, depicted in a private and emotional moment of prayer. The male dancer acts as a guardian angel waiting to assist the praying woman. The paternal configuration—female supplicant aided by male angel—fits neatly with traditional techniques of dance composition in which the woman is physically supported by a male partner.

The dance begins with the woman center stage with arms overhead and eyes closed, swaying in troubled circles from her waist like a tree bending in the wind. Off-camera voices call out over a chorus of humming: “Help me, Lord,” “Need help,” and “Make me ready, Lord.” Repeating motions of searching and blindness from “I’ve Been ’Buked,” the woman is suddenly lifted upward by the man, who had been awaiting her quietly in the shadows. She does not see him and seems unaware of his presence here and throughout the duet. Her trust and his authority are each depicted as absolute.

The woman composes her prayer in reaching and searching gestures, allowing the guardian angel to catch her gently in a variety of yielding positions. Her physical focus remains soft and hopeful, marked by an easy swing of the torso over strong, often straight, supporting legs. At one point she is supported precariously only by his hand on her neck, inches from the ground. Her hushed, unassuming confidence reflects the directness of the spiritual’s vocal soloist.

The staging builds through a series of dramatic, extended balances in unlikely sculptural positions executed by the woman. At first, her dance tasks seem physically simple: she is a devout woman physically expressing her faith. The exaggerated balances and “superhuman” feats of daring in later sections—falling toward the ground without hitting it, unfolding her limbs to extraordinary heights—demonstrate her strength and resilience in the world. The mood climaxes as she is lifted, held at the waist and knees by the angel lying on his back, in an extremely vulnerable, arched-back position. Reaching her arms upward,
she dances in the spirit without seeing the angel; she performs her faith without reference to her physical surroundings.

As in “I’ve Been ’Buked,” the final chorus of “Fix Me, Jesus” reprises movements from earlier sections of the dance, formally closing the woman’s ritual of prayer through the structured repetition. The dance ends with a surprising theatrical variation: the woman balances standing on the man’s leg, arched in a remarkably full arabesque position. Suspended in the air and reaching upward toward God, she stretches her back and arms into spiritual ascension. This supple, curving gesture arrives in stark contrast to the brittle and contracted, turned-in impulses of Revelations’ preceding dances. The ending suggests spiritual fulfillment achieved in the balance of an open, arching back and a complete exhalation of breath released upward.

The next selection, “Sinner Man,” begins with contrasting textures: the angelic voice of a solo soprano juxtaposed with the earthy running of three male dancers. Dressed in simple black tank tops and pants and wearing no shoes, the men portray sinners desperate to escape purgatory. Their dance explores a gen-
eralized emotion of fear through movement passages arranged in bold, dynamic
strokes.

Like “Daniel,” the dance follows an A-B-C-D-A design of a short, out-of-rhythm introduction; three solos set to three sung verses, one for each man; and a final unison group segment for all three dancers. Here, the solos are not set against contrapuntal movements of a background group; the dancers work alone on stage. The formal structure obliges each man to convey fearful distress with contrasting movement ideas: the first solo features reaching gestures, with long, slow extensions of the arms and hands; the second solo is concerned mostly with spiraling turns and slides across the floor on the knees; the third solo contains a challenging array of forceful jumps, turns, and kicks. All three solos use running to connect dance movements.

“Sinner Man” reveals the dramatic and technical facility of each dancer in a format reminiscent of challenge dancing. Each man elaborates on the theme of fear, displaying his particular version of emotional distress in a sequence of ever-rising intensity. As each soloist builds on ideas offered by his predecessor, then adds his own variation, a structured one-upmanship emerges, resolved when the men appear together for the ending unison chorus. Moving through a final flourish, they travel with a gasping, turning leap, then slide on the floor and turn onto their knees to drop their heads backward with the last beat of the drum. The flamboyantly dramatic, punchy ending presents irreconcilable anguish as the sole accomplishment of the sinner man’s pursuit.

“I Wanna Be Ready,” the male solo Ailey and dancer James Truitte created quickly to satisfy the strict timing needs of the television taping, offers Revelations’ climactic spiritual of sorrow and desolation. Built on Lester Horton–inspired floor exercises, the dance demonstrates both a man’s private wish for redemption and his physical preparation in a ritualistic test of control as he prepares to meet God. As if performing an act of penance, the man alternates holding his body with fearful tension and releasing that tension in controlled breaths of resignation. Moving in tandem with the baritone soloist’s musical phrasing, the dancer performs short, repetitive actions phrased to visualize the music: reaching and pulling, pleading and praying, balancing and meditating. Several movements pass through the shape of the cross.

The song lyric casts the singer and, by extension, the dancer as a sinner seeking penance: “I wanna be ready, Lord, ready to put on my long white robe.” Staying low to the ground for a remarkably demanding series of floor-bound movement, including an exacting passage of coccyx balances, the man describes his intertwined trepidation and piety. The solo ends inconclusively, with the man collapsed in a heap with his head to the ground on the final beat of the music, one hand subtly shielding his body from the premature arrival of the Lord.

After “I Wanna Be Ready,” Revelations shifts from the mournful solemnity of private supplication to the communal enactment of a waterside baptism. A large processional of eight dancers bursts onto the scene, swirling in bright white costumes and bearing mysterious, all-white props: an umbrella, a tree branch, and long swatches of gauzy white fabric. The off-camera voices return, and two
young women discuss an impending baptism, speaking over a sung, syncopated walking bass figure. Their dialogue stresses the importance of the ceremony, their discomfort at the prospect of entering a cold, muddy river, and general anxiety surrounding a rite of passage after which they “Ain’t gonna be a little girl no more.”

Turning in easy, loosely phrased patterns that move the group forward, the erect bodies and joyful fellowship of the dancers provide sharp contrast to the angst-ridden, contorted shapes of the preceding spirituals. The dancers form a column to move with steady determination toward the offstage riverside site of the impending baptism. Two initiates, a man and a woman in the center of the group, are distinguished by their lack of ceremonial props; the other dancers bear baptismal agents—the branch to sweep the earth, cloths to cleanse the sky, an umbrella for protection—to be used in the ceremony. The dancers move in confident, inexorable slow motion, directing their weight downward into the floor, holding their upper bodies still as their hips sway gently below.

At times, some dancers break the slow rhythm of the processional to run ahead, clearing a path for the celebrants with sweeping turns and tilted layout extensions. At one point, the group stops suddenly to bow their heads toward the ground in a tableau of genuflection. Arranged in a wedge formation reminiscent of the recurrent design of “I’ve Been ’Buked,” the tableau suggests coherence between this ceremony and the group prayer that began Revelations.

“Honor, Honor” follows the chanted processional with upbeat music of preparation to precede the act of baptism. The acolytes and deaconess bearing the umbrella sweep through the space, running in joyful, measured steps and turns, enacting the lyrics’ exhortation: “Run along children, be baptize[d], mighty pretty meeting by the waterside. Honor, honor unto the dying lamb.” As the music slows for a short, out-of-rhythm interlude of prayer, the initiates are blessed by the deaconess in simple mimetic gestures. Two acolytes writhe on the ground in front of the initiates, physically preparing the ritual space with ecstatic movements suggesting spirit possession. As the music resumes a joyful rhythmic urgency, the initiates and their sponsors stride toward the imaginary riverbank in sober, half-time steps while the two possession dancers buzz around the periphery of the space performing fast, swirling turns. The sequence employs a layering of rhythmic activity to suggest an assembly of individuals fulfilling discrete but interconnected tasks of preparation.

“Wade in the Water,” the most commonly known of all the spirituals selected by Ailey, accompanies the centerpiece dance of Revelations. A continuation of the baptismal ceremony, the dance begins simply, with the deaconess leading the two initiates into a river, represented by two long pieces of silk-like cloth stretched across the stage. With focused seriousness of intention, the initiates step into the water to begin a rippling motion of the torso which builds over the course of the song into full-bodied ecstatic dancing.

Ella Thompson, the deaconess with the umbrella here, guides the initiates into the dance, beckoning them forward while physically suggesting complex patterns of shoulder, arm, and torso isolations which they echo. Remaining in-
tent on facilitating the ceremony, her dutiful presence inspires, calms, and arbitrates as she moves between the initiates, directing and judging them, all the while holding her oversized white umbrella high in the air. Satisfied at their progress, she leaves the riverbank and allows the initiates to dance out their passion together.

The two initiates continue with serious, focused intention, dancing to complete the ceremony for themselves and the offstage congregation. Depicted as two individuals rather than a couple, they do not dance for, or see, each other. Moving in unison, their dance suggests spiritual commonality between man and woman, framed by the ceremony’s ritual purpose, without any reference to gender difference. Their costuming, however, underscores their sex: the woman wears a full white dress that leaves her arms and neck exposed, and the man wears only tightly fitted white slacks that bare his torso to the riverbank.

The final three dances of Revelations enact a rural southern gospel church service. Set inside a wood-framed church designed specially for the television presentation, the sequence is introduced with a brief piano interlude as two off-camera voices banter about gospel church service. “We don’t sing dead songs,”
“Rocka My Soul” from Alvin Ailey’s Revelations
from the television program Lamp Unto My Feet, 1962.
Photograph by J. Peter Happel

says one man, as another offers, “Make a noise unto the Lord, and jump up into
the dance!” to which the first man agrees, “Praise the Lord with Dance!” The
narrations here and throughout the television program underscore the theatri-
cality of Revelations as dance theater; they provide an enhanced context for the
choreographic coordination of religious music and concert dance.

The camera pans across the stage set to center on a preacher, the singer
Brother John Sellers, singing the invocation to service, “The Day Is Past and
Gone.” Seated on stools and chairs, the eight dancers face the preacher and rock
in assent to the sermon with deflected-focus cool, their eyes barely open, the
women fanning themselves gently with straw hand fans. As the invocation
segues to an up-beat, gospel-style preaching spiritual, “You May Run On (God
a-Mighty),” the dancers become animated, swaying and turning on their stools,
until the women eventually rise to dance in unison. The progression from seated
to dancing congregation is accomplished slowly, over an entire sung verse, as the
women respond naturalistically to the lyrics. The dance builds seamlessly from
simple swaying gestures through full-bodied leans and circles of the feet on the
floor, into animated gestures of pantomimed conversation to each other and fi-
nally stylized, character dance movements incorporating the whole body.

The men rise from their chairs to join in the dancing, skipping transitional
states of everyday gesture to launch into a flowing, tightly syncopated phrase of
bounding jazz dance. The choreography here is mostly defined by the feet,
building on small hopping bounces, catch steps, and occasional lurching con-
tractions of the torso. The men dance in unison, without seeing each other, and beyond the purview of the women, who sit down and turn away from them. Later, the women stand on their stools to point at the men, chastising them in gesture as singer Sellers admonishes: “Some folks go to church for to signify, tryin’ to make a date with the neighbor’s wife. But neighbor, let me tell you, just as sure as you’re born, you better leave that woman, better leave her alone!”11 The layering of chanted text and naturalistic gesture allows the sequence a relaxed playfulness in sharp contrast to preceding sections of Revelations.

The final gospel exclamation, “Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham,” ends the service on a celebratory high. Again the staging follows the musical structure closely, with choreographic changes mirroring transitions from chorus to verse, tonal modulations, and the rising intensity of the singing ensemble. The dance begins as the small congregation looks about, fanning themselves, allowing the spirit to descend in waves and hit individuals separately. When touched by the spirit, the dancers stop fanning and swaying to suddenly jerk an arm or head percussively upward, a movement that effectively breaks the underlying flow of rhythmic pulse. The dancers pair up, men to women, and in a staging detail reminiscent of ring-shout performance in the rural South, clear out the central area of the sanctuary for dance. Moving stools and chairs to the edges of the space, they emulate rural parishioners, walking with a stooped-over, lurching stride, holding their weight low to the ground as they test the floor’s strength. The women break out to dance first, in a flowing, rhythmic stepping passage that rises in urgency as a female soloist sings improvisatory riffs against a repeating choral background. They dance simple combinations of eight-count duration, first in a loose group, then, at the beginning of a new chorus, in a formal, diagonal line.

The song modulates upward again and again—like Jacob’s ladder, every round goes higher, higher!—and the entire company spreads out across the sanctuary to dance in unison. Their movement is all earthbound, but as the dance progresses, they pull their center of weight higher and higher into the upper body, away from the floor. Their dance explores a counterpoint of men against women, add-on steps begun by a single dancer and completed by the entire group, and the kaleidoscopic fanning out of dancers across the sanctuary space. By its end, the dancers hold their bodies proudly erect, no longer impersonating rural churchgoers, but now displaying facility in concert dance technique. Moving in unison, they turn and drop to the floor, ending on their knees in a frozen pose timed to the last beat of music, their arms stretched toward the heavens and heads thrown back in ecstasy.

The movement vocabulary here draws on classic jazz dance steps: struts, rhythmic floor patting by bare feet, shaking of the shoulders and torso, and movement phrasing in blocks of insistent eight. The alignment of jazz dance with gospel music reveals similar ecstatic intentions motivating both forms. In “Rocka My Soul,” Ailey confirms the fundamental connection between worship, a feature of daily life for many rural southern African Americans, and exuberant social dance, the root form of the codified jazz dance movements performed here.