

ARTS



Alvin Ailey's "Revelations" – set to African-American spirituals, gospel songs and blues – continues to bring people to their feet 47 years after its creation

A pioneer of America's wild west

DANCE REVIEW
Dennis Chang

Regardless of where our new Prime Minister decides to take our "special relationship" with America, I, for one, would love to see a continuing prosperous exchange of dance and dancers across the Atlantic. The Royal Ballet pinched Sarah Lamb from Boston and Alexandra Ansell from New York, and now they are Covent Garden's most prized commodities. In less than a fortnight's time the Somerset-born choreographer Christopher Wheeldon, who many thought had been lost to New York, will return to London to unveil his new ballet company and showcase some of America's finest dancers.

But there is also our insatiable appetite for American modern dance. Over the last couple of years the companies of Merce Cunningham, Mark Morris and others have each left different footprints on London stages. Yes, George Balanchine may forever reign as the Godfather of American dance, but he was ultimately a Soviet

émigré who created an American accent for a century-old European language. The real pioneers in the wild west were the "modern dancers" of the early 20th century.

It all started with Isadora Duncan. Hailing from San Francisco, she was a celebrity and cultural icon who, with her loose, flowing hair and bare feet, challenged the correctness of placement and formation in traditional ballet. Her search for a more organic, improvisatory approach to movement was to have a lasting impact on generations of American dance-makers.

Her most important spiritual heir is the now legendary Martha Graham. Using spastic movement, trembling and falling, Graham's high-strung melodrama shocked and mesmerised a public hitherto unaware of dance's ability to express emotional violence. By the mid-20th century Graham had inspired a host of disciples who would go on to blaze their own new trails.

One of these was Alvin Ailey – even if he drew his earliest influence from Lester Horton. Born in 1931 in Texas, Ailey's natural exuberance and interest in dance took him to California and then New York – the Mecca of American modern dance. Unlike his Graham stable mates Cunningham, Taylor, Tetley, and Tharp, who ventured into the avant-garde, Ailey's love for the gritty side of showbiz ultimately meant his creative leash wasn't as strained as it could have been, but he was able to build a devout following of dancers and audiences that surpassed most of his more cerebral counterparts.

In fact, I can't remember the last time an audience at Sadler's Wells gave such lusty cheers as they did on the opening night of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre's five-week British tour. They closed the show with Ailey's *Revelations* – a work that continues to bring people to their feet 47 years after its creation. It was not difficult to see why.

Set to a jamboree of African-American spirituals, gospel songs and blues, the 10 numbers of *Revelations* probe the depths of grief, love, ecstasy, hope and, sometimes, plain old good fun.

Ailey's love of showbiz meant he could build up a following that surpassed his more cerebral peers

The opening "I Been 'Buked" sets a ritualistic tone. Men and women in drab-coloured dance clothes clustered together and extended their arms skyward as if searching for answers. In vain, they simultaneously sank into a deep, wide straddle. In "Wade in the Water", Rosalyn Deshauteurs, Matthew Rushing and Renee Robinson sauntered on carrying a branch with bells, a swag of white cloth and an umbrella fluttering with chiffon. Their purpose was to re-enact a couple's baptism through dance, but the image that remained in the memory was the tranquility and devotion with which the dancers stood motionless in front of the altar, symbol-

ized by the white cloth. The hunky Amos J Macchia Jr was the disconcerting lead in "I Want To Be Ready". Lying on the floor while perched on one hip, he strained upward like a wounded black panther, only to fall back in frustration. The hothead mood evaporated in a blink when a small army of women in yellow dresses and wide-brimmed hats carried stools and palm-leaf fans on stage as if attending a revival meeting. Their comic mime drew giggles, but when the men joined in the booty shakes and high kicks for the final "Rocka My Soul" we were all clapping along.

The *River* was altogether more sober, but when stripped of the razzle-dazzle, Ailey's jazz ballet idiom can look surprisingly sane. I was particularly struck by the frequency with which the dancers raise one leg past the shoulder to the side while balancing precariously on the other – a manoeuvre that is second nature to dancers the world over.

On the other hand, it was also in *The River* we saw best dancing of the evening – from Linda Celeste Sims in the romantic "Lake" pas de deux; her line, control, and sense of timing could not be faulted. She was again the star in Ailey's 1976 *Foxes de Oude* – every bit as sassy and mercurial as her aply named partner, Matthew Rushing.

It's nice, yes, but why the attempt to shock?

FILM REVIEW
Freddie SayersSuperbad
15 CERT, 114 MINS

O h, the gamble. The sheer brazenness of it. Calling a film *Superbad* – an invitation to second-rate film critics the world over, desperate for a neat closing line, to conclude that the movie really is superb. I have seen it and, believe me, it is bad enough to deserve the soundtrack. Imagine my surprise when I had a look on rottenmovies.com, the website that gathers the critical reviews of movies from across the world, and found that not only have my esteemed counterparts eschewed that particular cheap word trick – they actually like it! Of the 146 reviews posted on the site, 127 deem *Superbad* to be a great movie. I mean really, who are these people?

"2007, the year movie comedy was saved," headlines Sean Burns of the *Philadelphia Weekly*; "A super-smart evocation of teenage insecurity," concludes the *Bearish Inquirer*; and, worst of all, from the *LA Times* – "*Superbad* is super-cute." Well, let me add my own adjectives to the morass: *Superbad* is super-unfunny, super-confused and super-self-sinking, undermined by its own attempt to be nice. Jolly, eh?

It belongs to the school of American teen comedy, founded by the 1990 shocker *American Pie*, which makes a virtue of extreme crassness – the comedy of squirming in your seat and covering your eyes. The thrill lies in taking the most ugly, intimate embarrassments of being a teenager and putting them on the screen, unflinching. The thrill lies in taking the most ugly, intimate embarrassments of being a teenager and putting them on the screen, unflinching. The thrill lies in taking the most ugly, intimate embarrassments of being a teenager and putting them on the screen, unflinching.

The plot, just as in *American Pie*, consists of three high-school kids trying to "get with" girls before they go to college; but *Superbad* follows the geeks instead of the empty-headed jocks, and focuses on their friendships and insecurities rather than their success with girls. Written by Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg who were still teenagers, the love story is really that of two best

friends (Seth and Evan, played by Jonah Hill and Michael Cera) who are going to different colleges and don't know what they will do without each other. Their journey to a grad party goes disastrously wrong when their geeky friend Fogell (Christopher Mintz-Plasse) gets entangled with a strange pair of policemen while buying the booze for the party.

The funny bits, when they occasionally come, tend to be the quieter, awkward moments rather than the shocking taboos. A playful mid-judge that ends up being a slap; Fogell's choice of the single word "McLovin" as the name on his fake ID; Seth's dream sequences imagining what might happen if he stole booze: Evan being forced to sing soul music for a bunch of gangsters on the mis-understanding that he is an amazing singer. The ending is sober and sweet, a resounding rejection of the moral bromance of *American Pie*.

All of which is good and well. It certainly has more "heart" than earlier examples of the genre, and rather than making you feel like only debauchees, there is some softness to it. But there are two fatal problems. First, it is not well-written – for the first 10 minutes, I didn't hear a laugh and it seems sloppy and clearly semi-improvised. The whole subplot of Fogell's adventures with the two infantile cops, running people over, shooting guns and burning cars, is simply bizarre and, in the context of the rest of the film's realism, seems ominous and inappropriate.

But, most of all, the new-found naiveness and the emphasis on friendship does not reinvent the genre of bawdy teenage comedy; instead it just makes you wish it was a different kind of film. The script was written back in 2000, while Seth and Evan were still at school; they're not like the *American Pie* and, feeling it did not properly represent the experience of being a teenager, they wrote *Superbad* as a different kind of film. The thrill lies in taking the most ugly, intimate embarrassments of being a teenager and putting them on the screen, unflinching. The thrill lies in taking the most ugly, intimate embarrassments of being a teenager and putting them on the screen, unflinching.

I've got a better idea. If the writers agree that crass teenage comedies don't do it for them, and that life is more tender than that, and if 127 out of 146 critics are right and enjoyed that *Superbad* seems to defy the mould and subvert the genre – why not forget the shock-factor genre altogether next time and write a comedy that you really believe in?

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No need for 'relevance'

THEATRE REVIEW

Burial at Thebes

NOTTINGHAM PLAYHOUSE

Seamus Heaney has based *Burial at Thebes* on Sophocles' *Antigone*, but even by the standards of Greek tragedy there's a high body count. Polyneices has been killed in battle, but King Creon refuses to allow him proper burial. Antigone, his sister, buries him in defiance of Creon and then commits suicide to avoid the death sentence. Her betrothed, Haemon, son of Creon, also kills himself, as do Polyneices's sister, Ismene, and Eurydice, the wife of Creon.

It could be my memory playing tricks, but this new production, again in-house and again directed by Lucy Pittman-Wallace, seems even better than the one that ran with huge success in 2005. Apparently Heaney has altered some of the text and effected other changes; it certainly seems less heavy-handed in its critique of George W Bush and his war on terror.

In 2005 the words "accessible" and "relevant" were being bandied about to promote Heaney's adaptation, which is a shame because *Antigone* is a classic and does not need to be more relevant – especially if, by relevant, the promoters actually mean the rather patronising comparisons between Creon and Bush.

Instead the audience should be left to draw its own conclusions – as it is in this latest production. We might, for instance, wish to conclude that Creon's "if you're not with us you're against us" world-view is closer to that of your average suicide bomber than it is to George W's.

The *Burial at Thebes* is still misleadingly referred to as a new translation; actually Heaney has created an adaptation based on existing translations from the Greek original. The text is vigorous, immediate and full of concrete images. "The sky was vomiting black air," the Guard tells Creon with regard to the illegal burial. "You can't just pluck your honour off a bush you didn't plant," Antigone tells Ismene, trying to dissuade the latter from joining her in suicide. "I am under the wheels of the world," wails Creon as he holds his son's body in his arms. The Chorus tells Creon: "The future is cloth waiting to be cut."

There is no interval, but the 75 minutes never drag: from the powerful opening moment, when a single column of light streams down to the ritual bowl of water, we are thrust into an absorbing plot. This is not simply a translation to the quality of the text: Jessica Curtis's semi-circular cast, as basic and unflashy as the script, complements the existing semi-circle in the Nottingham Playhouse auditorium to complete a circle. The audience is in a Greek amphitheatre. It is thereby

drawn into the argument. Abby Ford's Antigone is altogether frazier than Jodie McNece's two years back. It therefore seems a matter of greater bravery to follow, regardless of consequences, the principle that the law of the land takes precedence over that of the king.

As Creon, Paul Rentall is even more effective than his predecessor. If he had no lines you would know what he was thinking; you can tell from the eyes and nuances of facial expression that, from the start, he has doubts about himself as a politician and leader. When he talks of Polyneices in his brilliantly delivered initial speech his voice almost breaks with sorrow and anger. And he often fractures his lines in a way that is convincing but actually realistic. It is a masterly performance.

The Chorus is magical, the singing and choreography deeply satisfying. We'll never know how ancient Greek music sounded but an illusion of authenticity is achieved. The only low point is touched when two of the singers threaten to break into a nasal accent that has never existed outside the land of folk singers.

In this finely crafted tragedy the Guard, played by David Acton as a downtrodden pragmatist, a representative of the common man, provides rare moments of comedy.

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