

Portrait in Black and White:

Al Crawford Lights *Awakening*

Audiences attending Alvin Ailey's winter season at New York's City Center got an eye-opening experience with the premiere of *Awakening*, a stark, startling new piece choreographed by Robert Battle, the company's artistic director. Driven by John Mackey's powerful, muscular musical score, the piece features a dozen dancers, clad in white, who tear across the stage, often ending in complex tangles, out of which emerges a kind of leader/savior figure. Al Crawford's lighting sharply carves out any number of looks using many angles and a severely limited color palette; the designer also adds a pinpoint constellation of white lights arranged on an upstage drop that appears midway through the piece. Overall, Crawford creates a suitably teasing environment for a mysterious work that was interpreted by some critics as a parable of power and leadership.

"Everything started with the music," says Crawford, who adds that it was developed over the course of many months, "before there was a step or a costume or anything. Robert played it for me and we talked about possible imagery in very abstract terms. We discussed the

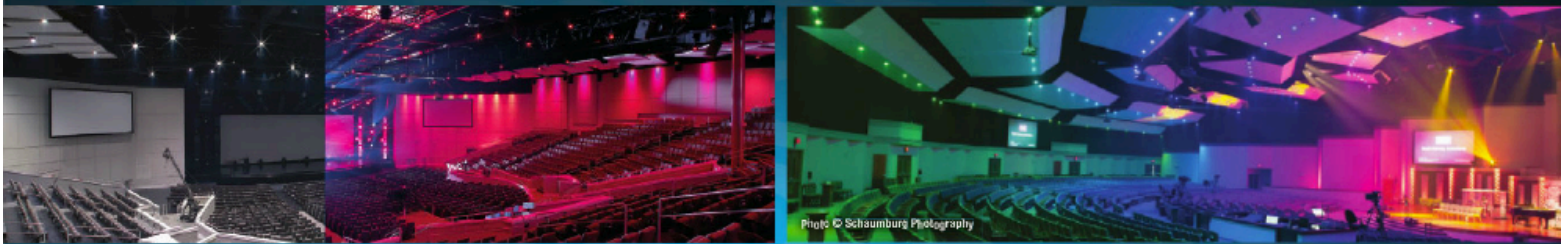
dynamic qualities of the music at length before there was ever a step. It was a unique experience. So often, we're brought in on the back end of a production, after the costume design and the choreography are in place. It was great to be on the front end of it."

Thus, the designer adds, "I spent three months with the music, while touring Europe and Africa with Ailey, trying to break it down from a dynamics perspective. When Robert put his steps to the music, I hoped that what I was developing aligned what he was doing. Then came the backdrop."

The latter piece, Crawford says, was conceived out of the desire to give a distinct graphic look to each of the first and second sections of *Awakening*. At one point in the first section, the black upstage wall opens along a horizontal line, revealing a narrow band of blinding white light. "The crack of light is an expression of faith, love, self-awareness; it represents something we are looking for, but cannot always seem to reach, seeping in. The LED wall is meant to be a more contemporary expression of that idea, that light symbolizes what everyone is striving for—love or accept-

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ance or what have you. Robert kept using words like 'celestial' and 'eternity.' Instead of doing a classic star drop, I wanted something that could feel like a wall of light, with the top looking like it could go on forever. I thought that a perfect grid would be too rigid; the layout we landed on is more of an ombre at the top, with the grid spacing out, creating this idea of infinity."

The drop consists of black material, supplied by iWeiss, into which has been wired with a series of Philips Color Kinetics iColor Flex LMX nodes, 60' wide x 30' tall and using four universes of data. It was assembled by Wilmington, Delaware-based Main Light Industries. "Basically, it's a black piece of fabric, about 2" thick, with the nodes sewn into it," Crawford says, adding that, given the company's extensive touring schedule, "it had to be designed to move. It will be handled as often as two or three times a week, being folded and put into cases. Also, it had to be built so that we have access to the back of it for maintenance. Main Light and iWeiss did a great job together to produce this project for us."

Speaking of the color palette, Crawford says, "I wanted to work with temperature, as opposed to a more saturated color world. When Robert used the words, 'celestial experience,' I felt that indicated crisp, clean, clear light. The one moment we push the color is when the crack closes at the end of the first section. A little push of heat, almost reaching

gold, adds the tension that moment needs. I was excited about doing a white light ballet. It forced me to respect the color in every moment because of the tight color range we embraced." Regarding the challenge of creating various carved-out looks, he adds, "Robert is a genius in the way that he creates stage patterns; everything I did architectural-ly came from the movement."

The designer drew heavily on the repertory plot to light *Awakening*, relying significantly on the rig's conventional units. (The plot contains about 350 conventional tungsten Source Fours, Wybron Coloram IT scrollers, a handful of ETC Selador Lustrs, plus 11 Martin Professional MAC Vipers Profile; lighting is controlled by an ETC Eos Ti console. The company's gear is entirely supplied by 4Wall Entertainment.) Ailey owns its own 3-D previsualization suite, which makes use of Lightconverse software and an ETC Ion console, which allowed the designer and choreographer to accomplish a considerable amount of prep work. "Robert came to our studio to see what I was planning on doing, which allowed me to make adjustments live," Crawford says. "By the time we got to the theatre, the drop was generally all worked out. I could then focus on the rest of the stage lighting and bring everything together."

Not that the latter was a simple task, especially given Ailey's standard production practice, which sometimes proves to be a shock for guest designers. "You can work on

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a piece for nine months—like having a baby—and then you get three hours to write cues,” Crawford says. “The first time you see it with the dancers is with the press in the audience. It’s been the established way of working for 30-some years. It’s nerve-wracking, but it puts everybody on their A games. We do a lot of advance work to prepare for this kind of schedule, however I’m careful to not do too much so that I’m stale by the time I get there. A lot of it comes from good instincts when you are in the hot seat.”

Crawford, whose father, Chip Crawford, is a jazz musician of note, says that his lighting process is informed by a life spent immersed in music. “Even for a project that doesn’t have music—say a piece of architecture, an event, or art installation—I will find the music that speaks to that project for my own process. Music has always been an incredible conduit for me, and that’s totally because of my upbringing. I have to find some emotional context for the work I’m doing.”

Crawford has been lighting director for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for 18 years, having lit more than 30 dances between the first and second companies. He balances a busy international touring schedule with work for his own firm, Arc3design, designing lighting for a variety of architectural, broadcast, and live performance projects. He says he makes it all work by focusing 110% on the project at hand. “Everyone should feel like they’re your only client,” he says. “And you have to surround yourself with the most talented, most loving people to stand behind you and your work. It only functions because I have incredible teams at both Ailey and Arc3 as well as longtime vendors such as 4Wall, Tinc Productions, and Barbizon Lighting who take great care in supporting our projects.”

Ailey’s City Center season concluded in December. Next month, the company plays dates in Washington, Atlanta, Gainesville, Miami, Chapel Hill, and Norfolk on a four-month U.S. tour—and already, the designer says, he is beginning to think about next year’s dances. 🎶