

Ailey pulls out the stops at festive season opener

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By Jocelyn Noveck

You can always count on a few things about the annual Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater gala at City Center.

It will be a grand occasion. The audience will be packed, enthusiastic, beautifully dressed. Much money will be raised, and "Revelations" will be on the program.

Not that it should be any different. But this year's event posed a unique challenge: How to make "Revelations," that crown jewel in the Ailey repertoire, shine even brighter, to mark the ascendance of new artistic director Robert Battle and the dawn of the post-Judith Jamison era? (Plus the sparkling renovation of City Center, the company's performing home.)

Clearly, a special weapon was needed. Live music? That was great, but they've done it before. Dancers spilling into the aisles and balcony? Not bad. But the surefire winner was to bring on the children.

Six children as young as 7 — students of the Ailey school's junior division — were a delightful and moving addition, gazing heavenward with intensity and splaying their hands in the distinctive moves of "I've Been 'Buked," then sashaying across the stage with their elders in "Wade in the Water." Considering that "Revelations," Ailey's masterpiece, is more than 50 years old and shows no signs of fading, it didn't seem too farfetched to imagine these kids taking the leads in 15 years or so.

The evening was peppered with guest appearances, the first by singer John Legend, crooning Stevie Wonder's "If It's Magic" as the returning Alicia Graf Mack, even more lithe and statuesque than most Ailey dancers, performed a solo choreographed in 2004 by none other than Jamison, who stepped down last season after more than two decades at the helm.

Jamison's hand-picked successor, Battle, was eager to show off the sense of humor that has become a hallmark of his public appearances, tossing off jokes, hogging the spotlight just a little and making it clear he intends to be a colorful, jovial presence for years to come.



Battle was welcomed warmly by the Ailey board's chairperson, Joan Weill, who told the crowd the event had raised \$2.5 million. Speaking later was the glamorous Iman, one of the evening's honorary chairs. The other was first lady Michelle Obama, who remained in Washington and sent a statement instead.

From John Legend to Paul Taylor: The 81-year-old master of modern dance was on hand to see his 1981 classic, "Arden Court," tackled by the Ailey dancers. The men in particular gave the piece a thrillingly muscular feel; obviously new to it,



AP Photo/Mark Lennihan
Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre holds a dress rehearsal of Arden Court, Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2011 in New York. The work by choreographer Paul Taylor opens Wednesday evening in the newly renovated theater.

they seemed to relish the speed, particularly an ending that has them literally flying across the stage and into the wings.

The graceful Clifton Brown, performing as a guest artist this season, had a romantic but too-brief duet with the lovely Linda Celeste Sims, "Prelude to a Kiss" by Lar Lubovitch. And then the piece de resistance of any Ailey gala: the amazingly durable "Revelations," this time performed by an exuberant though sometimes unwieldy cast of 50 — including 12 dancers from the junior company, Ailey II, and 20 from the Ailey School.



The youngest pupils — Yana Gupta, 7, Rohan Mehta and Kelsey Lewis, 8, Alex Haskins, 10, Kaitlyn Benzant, 12, and Leo Hishikawa, 14 — were probably all having an experience they will remember for a lifetime.

After all, they were sharing the stage with veterans such as Matthew Rushing and Renee Robinson, whose joy in the choreography and music was evident as always. Just catch Rushing's face in "Rocka My Soul" if you want to see a dancer loving what he does, no matter how many times he's done it. It's hard to imagine the final number without him, front and center.



Also appeared:

