

New Ailey Chief Adds Crowd-Pleasers To Repertory

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By Jocelyn Noveck

NEW YORK — Imagine you're in the audience at, say, "Swan Lake," and the ballerinas you've been watching suddenly swoop over to your seat, envelop you with their wings and spirit you onstage to flutter along en point e.

Not gonna happen — except maybe in a vivid dream after a late-night viewing of "Black Swan." But at Alvin Ailey, where the very vocal audience somehow always seems closer to the action than elsewhere, it was a real possibility in the five-week season that ended on New Year's Day.

The vehicle for this audience participation was Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin's "Minus 16," which new artistic director Robert Battle added to the Ailey repertory in this, his inaugural season. "Minus 16" is a strange but compelling work which also has the unlikely distinction of using a popular children's Passover song ("Echad Mi Yodea," or "Who Knows One?") on its soundtrack.



In this undated image released by Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, dancers clad in black suits and hats perform in "Minus 16," choreographed by Ohad Naharin in New York. Photo by Paul Kolnik

"Minus 16" begins with its dancers, clad in black suits and hats, sitting on chairs laid out in a semicircle. As the Hebrew song goes through 13 verses, the dancers lurch violently out of their chairs and back into them, with one dancer falling flat on the floor each time — clearly the odd man out.

Gradually the dancers, who chant some of the words themselves, shed their clothes — tossing off first hats, then shirts, shoes and pants, until they're in undergarments.

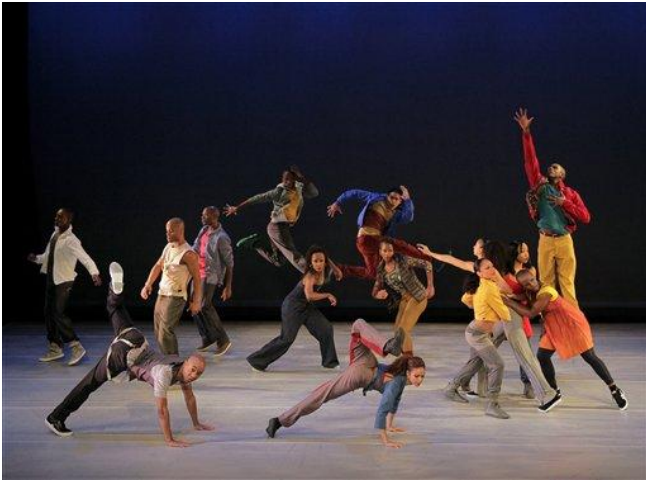
Later, these dancers suddenly appear in the audience, looking around in a rather sinister way for partners to bring up onstage.

At a recent performance, some of those recruited looked like deer in the headlights, but most of the amateur dancers were footloose and uninhibited, including one elderly woman who truly brought down the house, engaging in lifts and spins with a male partner at least twice her size, and even rolling around on the floor with aplomb. (She should have been signed as a recurring guest performer on the spot.)

Since so many of the company's offerings have long tended to pale in comparison to the majestic "Revelations," Ailey's half-century old masterpiece, it's smart for Battle to have introduced a few high-octane crowd-pleasers into the repertory.

Another audience hit this season was "Home," by the choreographer Rennie Harris. The work was really no more and no less than a visually compelling series of hip-hop moves by some of the most adept dancers in the world.

You could argue about whether "Home" had much depth or coherence, but you couldn't really argue that it was great fun to watch the expressive Matthew Rushing or the incredibly long-limbed, graceful Alicia Graf Mack, all 5-foot-10 of her, interpreting Harris' moves.



In this undated image released by Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, dancers perform in "Home," choreographed by Rennie Harris in New York. Photo by Paul Kolnik

And you couldn't argue with the pleasure it brought the crowd. One of the nice things about going to an Ailey performance is the knowledge that in this economy, so brutal for arts organizations, there's a company that can come close to filling the 2,250-seat City Center for five weeks.

You can pick nits, if you choose to, with the knowledge that this company is so successful you'll be able to pick nits next year, too, after the dancers finish touring the country and the world, as they do each year (the company now embarks on a four-month, 27-city national tour).

performance, sway along to the spirituals of "Revelations," and maybe even get pulled onstage to dance in "Minus 16." The rest of the audience will welcome you, as they do every other dancer up there.

If you choose to, we stress. You can also just let yourself be swept along with the infectious good spirits of an Ailey

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