

## Alvin Ailey troupe to bring celebration, grace to Fox Theatre

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By Cynthia Perry

There's a cool, seductive way an Alvin Ailey dancer takes the stage — a pantherlike walk with the chest held high, hips and shoulders rolling ever so slightly. It's one of the things choreographer Kyle Abraham loves about Ailey's style.

In Abraham's "Another Night," dancer Jacqueline Green, in peacock blue, struts across the stage, slow and controlled against a frenetic bebop rhythm. She shifts from proud to playful, bobbing her head forward and back. Shoulders, elbows and knees join in, pulsing to the music's bubbly beat.

It's "a little crazy, a little off," Abraham says. "There's something fun about that — just to kind of break out of that sexy thing. To me, goofy is sexy, too."

"Another Night" is part of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's expanding repertoire. Known for celebrating African-American culture through theatrically appealing, accessible modern dance styles, the company will perform at the Fox Theatre Feb. 14-17.

"Another Night" marks a milestone for Abraham, a rising star on the New York dance scene. His first Ailey commission, it's a chance to gain massive exposure and a sign, as Artistic Director Robert Battle recently said, that Abraham has made "the big time."

At 35, Abraham joins a line of choreographers whose first Ailey commissions marked turning points in their careers, fulfilling Ailey's aim to give African-American choreographers opportunities to show work. Battle is part of this line, and so is Ronald K. Brown, whose first Ailey work, "Grace," is revived this season. Brown and Abraham talked recently about "the Ailey call," and how it influenced their careers.

Ailey's "Revelations" inspired Brown at around age 8, showing that dances could be "about people in church, and God." In 1985, Brown formed Evidence, A Dance Company, where he developed his own spiritually infused style, drawing from cultures of Africa and the African diaspora, telling stories through a blend of West African, urban and modern dance.

In 1996, Brown recalled, Ailey Artistic Director Judith Jamison asked him to choreograph for the 1999 season. Brown was overwhelmed with a sense of grace; hence, his title. He made "Grace" a tribute to Ailey, whose company has shown Brown that it was possible to have a career as a choreographer with his own troupe.

Since Duke Ellington was a favorite of Ailey's, Brown said, he bookended the dance work with two different versions of Ellington's "Come Sunday." Between these, a story unfolds about a community that's lost its sense of grace. In the final section, to Jennifer Holliday's soulful interpretation of "Come Sunday," angels in white help a city's wayward people to "receive forgiveness, and get another chance."

Brown, 46, has since choreographed three additional works for the Ailey troupe while Evidence's budget has increased more than tenfold.

It's the kind of trajectory Abraham hopes to attain. His company, Abraham.In.Motion, started in 2007; his lush style slips easily between influences ranging from modern dance pioneer Martha Graham to postmodern maven Trisha Brown; from rave culture to hip-hop, informed by his urban Pittsburgh upbringing.





When Abraham received Battle's call, he'd started "Pavement," inspired by the 1991 film "Boyz N the Hood" and W.E.B. Du Bois' "The Souls of Black Folk." Deeply rooted in the struggles of a community torn by gang violence and the effects of drugs, Abraham said, "Pavement" depicts "harsher times of a black community that once celebrated its culture and history."

"Another Night" is that celebration. To Art Blakey's rendition of Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia," the dance references Pittsburgh's vibrant jazz scene of the 1950s and 1960s, when neighborhoods were filled with music, dance and luminaries like Blakey

and Billy Strayhorn.

Since he took the Ailey call, Abraham has received a \$50,000 United States Artists Fellowship (Brown received one in 2006) and a two-year New York Live Arts residency.

Both Brown and Abraham have benefited from their Ailey ties, but there is a catch, Brown said. Ailey's style has become so popular and pervasive that many people assume that all African-American modern dance looks like Ailey's work. Independent choreographers like Brown and Abraham are helping to break down this misconception, exposing Ailey's broad audiences to more varied and individual voices.

Abraham hopes "Another Night" will intrigue Ailey audiences to see evening-length shows like "Pavement." More than that, he wants the communities that inspired his works to see them.

"I want to see my cousins," Abraham said, "you know, the girl from the corner store, saying, 'Oh, yeah, I'm going to that dance show. I want to see that.'"

Programming also features Ohad Naharin's "Minus 16," Garth Fagan's "From Before" and two vigorous Robert Battle works: "Strange Humors" and "In/Side."

Dancer Renee Robinson will lead "Revelations" the nights of Feb. 14-15 in farewell performances after a distinguished career of more than 30 years with the troupe.

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## Dance preview

### Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

#### Performance schedule

8 p.m. Feb. 14 and 16: "Another Night," "In/Side," "Minus 16," "Revelations."

8 p.m. Feb. 15, 2 p.m. Feb. 16 and 3 p.m. Feb. 17: "From Before," "Strange Humors," "Grace," "Revelations." (A Q&A with dancers will follow the Saturday matinee.)

**Student day performance:** "Another Night," "Revelations." 10:30 a.m. Feb. 14. \$10. 404-881-2000.

\$25-\$65. For info on opening night, student and Saturday matinee discounts, visit [www.alvinailey.org/atlanta](http://www.alvinailey.org/atlanta).

For discount on groups of 10 or more, call 404-881-2000.

Fox Theatre, 660 Peachtree Street N.E. 404-881-2100, [www.foxtheatre.org](http://www.foxtheatre.org), or 1-855-285-8499, [www.alvinailey.org](http://www.alvinailey.org).