

Oprah Joins Jamison, Ailey Dancers in 50th Season: Tobi Tobias

Review by Tobi Tobias



Dec. 5 (Bloomberg) -- The **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater** scorns doing things by half measures. Wednesday night's gala opening of its five-week season at the City Center, celebrating its 50th anniversary, pulled out all the stops. What other dance company commands celebrities like **Oprah Winfrey** and divas like **Jessye Norman** to play a supporting role in what is often called "the orphan art"?

Judith Jamison, the company's director, is a dazzling personality in her own right. Her speeches from the stage veered effortlessly from blithe humor to impassioned gravity. Winfrey's tribute was forceful and compelling. And the first-night audience, fabulously dressed for festivity, matched the onstage performance with an ogle-worthy fashion show at intermission.

By the way, there was some dancing. After a lively, concise film on the company's history, Ailey School students represented the rising generation in "Echoes of Alvin," choreographed for the occasion by former company dancer Christopher Huggins. Then the lovely Donna Wood, an unforgettable Ailey alumna, emceed five Ailey excerpts performed by the main company.

The evening closed with the choreographer's signature work, the 1960 "Revelations," which, as always, stirred the audience to a fever pitch. All the superb solo singers of the spirituals stood onstage with the dancers instead of being seated in the pit.

Diva Distraction

The effect distracted somewhat from the dancing (especially in the incomparable rendition of the "Fix Me, Jesus" duet by Linda Celeste Sims and Glenn Allen Sims), but in the case of Jessye Norman, one can't really complain.

After the customary encore of the closing few minutes of "Revelations," the dancers reverently laid the sheaves of white roses they received during the curtain calls on the floor beneath a giant photo portrait of Ailey and left the stage. As the audience departed, the curtain remained raised, the dancing space gently illuminated like a shrine.

The season will feature lots of the company's most striking works, a full week of programs devoted to choreography set to **Duke Ellington** music, performed live by the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra with **Wynton Marsalis**, and two new pieces.

Ailey dancer Hope Boykin, who moves with a primal passion, has also begun a choreographic career. For her "Go in Grace," she's collaborated with the all-female vocal group Sweet Honey in the Rock, whose members will be mingled with the dancers.

The Italian choreographer Mauro Bigonzetti, who has sparked considerable interest in the U.S., will contribute "Festa Barocca," set to a Handel score and blending classical and modern-dance techniques, an Ailey specialty.

Ailey's Half-Century

The Ailey company's importance lies as much offstage as it does in the pyrotechnical and emotional feats his dancers routinely achieve.

Its founding a half-century ago was the familiar shoestring venture, but one with a unique goal: creating a company mainly of black dancers, who were, shamefully, often excluded from the field.

In recent years, superb management has achieved goals ranging from steady employment for the dancers to the building of a \$56 million mid-Manhattan complex that houses the main company, a junior troupe (Ailey II) and the Ailey school.

Over the years, members of the company have received just about every major dance award. A charismatic ambassador for its art, the Ailey has crisscrossed the globe, performing all over the U.S. and Asia and in European temples of classical culture like the Paris Opera and St. Petersburg's Maryinsky Theater.

Jamison plans to retire in 2011. It's hard to imagine who might replace her until you realize she succeeded Ailey and, instead of things falling apart, had the Empire State Building glowing gold last night in the company's honor.

Through Jan. 4 at 131 W. 55th St. Information: +1-212-581- 1212;

<http://www.alvinailey.org>.

(**Tobi Tobias** is the New York dance critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)

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