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ALVIN AILEY DANCE ★★★½

On cusp of big change, troupe is in top form

By Sid Smith

SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is on the brink of a major transition while at the top of its game, judging from its terrific opening this week at the Auditorium Theatre, where Wednesday marked the troupe's 140th performance at that venue.

Judith Jamison steps down and Robert Battle takes over as artistic director this summer, and the soaring performance of his "The Hunt" Wednesday demonstrated why fans have every reason for optimism. "The Hunt" (2001) pulsates with Battle's seething

When: Through Sunday

Where: Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress Parkway

Tickets: \$30-\$87; 800-982-2787 or ticketmaster.com

passion, his affinity for modern percussion (courtesy here of Les Tambours du Bronx) and his brash primal intensity. Six men, clad in black skirts hiding an under layer of red — the blood of the kill, no doubt — enact moves evoking both the ritualistic and the feral, three of them dragging the other three as if carcasses for a stretch, or engaging in a motif in which

some of them tower over others who lie prone and powerless. The dance, meanwhile, is all power, everything from jumps to one hurdle resembling a Hydra's head of snakelike arms, all of it relentlessly propulsive and much more forceful in this rendition by Ailey's main troupe than the version seen here last summer.

Wednesday's outing (the troupe plays through Sunday) also included an immensely enjoyable Chicago premiere. Christopher Huggins' "Anointed" is every bit as entertaining and fresh as his "Pyrokinesis" for the Giordano troupe some years back. "Anointed" is a bright, three-part fantasia in part defined by its neon colored costumes (by the choreographer) and its mixture of classical form and devilish originality. It's a great showcase for Linda Celeste Sims, whose arabesques and graceful twirls help define the dance and who pulls off one spectacular run and leap into the arms of Jamar Roberts.

"The Evolution of a Secured Feminine" is a puckish solo, deliciously enacted by Rachael McLaren, clad in sexy business attire and put through a wicked, soulful marathon to vocals from Ella Fitzgerald, Betty Carter and Nancy Wilson. McLaren, while portraying a woman scorned but not to be messed with, delivers a cavalcade of fast, stylish, brittle and often funny moves.

"Revelations," the late Alvin Ailey's masterpiece, now in its 50th year and introduced by a film that includes his commentary, completed the program, which varies throughout the engagement.



Linda Celeste Sims and Jamar Roberts perform Christopher Huggins' three-part fantasia "Anointed."