

Of 'Home' and 'Revelations': The Alvin Ailey Company Return to City Center

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By Susan Reiter

Moving in both new and familiar ways, but always with its own distinctive élan and communicative energy—the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre is back for their annual five-week City Center season. While there hasn't been anything resembling a major shake-up, the company is under new artistic direction, with Robert Battle having succeeded Judith Jamison following her illustrious 22-year tenure. He has reached out to several choreographers whose styles and demands stretch the dancers in boldly challenging ways, and had an impact on the company's roster (eight of the 31 dancers are new this year), but he is also honoring the company's history in interesting ways. The addition of Paul Taylor's *Arden Court* to the Ailey repertory is clearly a major event, and it opened the company's annual gala. This 1981 masterwork set to the Baroque symphonies of William Boyce is the first Taylor work to be danced by the company. It's a male showpiece, but also an homage to courtliness and a gleamingly romantic work. On ample display are Taylor's innate mastery of structure and his ability to balance different shadings of movement and tone. The work was created at a time when the Taylor troupe's male roster boasted an amazingly athletic and powerful ensemble, and memories of the original cast remain vivid for those who saw them.



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Paul Taylor's *Arden Court*. Photo by Christopher Duggan

Leaping along a diagonal with surging power, the Ailey men inspire confidence right from the start. They don't just explode into space, they shape each movement dynamically, springing up into diamond-shaped jumps and landing in a plush second position plié. Glenn Allen Sims is majestic as the one who enters slowly, displaying exquisite gravitas before he too gets caught up in the playful, buoyant athleticism. The series of duets that follow in quick succession are marked by contrast as well as deep connection. The cast's three women—Alicia Graf Mack, Rachel McLaren and Linda Celeste Sims—look radiant and brought out some details I hadn't noticed in a while. All credit to former Taylor dancer Cathy McCann, who staged the work. Some of the partnering will no doubt smooth out as the company gets more familiar with dancing it, but *Arden Court* seems well on its way to finding a place in the Ailey repertory—and Battle has expressed interest in adding more Taylor, which sounds promising.

The season's one world premiere is *Home*, by Philadelphia-based choreographer Rennie Harris, whose work draws from hip-hop and street movement, arranging them with theatrical savvy and power. He worked with Ailey once before—creating the central section of the 2004 work *Love Stories*—with terrific results. Much has been made of this premiere being inspired by the Bristol-Myers Squibb “Fight AIDS Your Way” initiative (supported by the company), and the premiere of *Home* took place on World AIDS Day. Harris' charge was to draw on the 10 winning entries from the initiative (an annual competition), but his 25-minute dance steers clear of specific stories or characters. It is a riveting, fluid celebration of community as well as the individuality within it.

It opens in an understated manner and builds slowly; we see a surging, undulating ensemble in a wedge configuration that returns later and acknowledges an iconic moment from Ailey's *Revelations*, and while small

moments of individual movement bubble to the surface, the collective remains dominant for quite a while. When the score of echoing, overlapping sounds gives way to a steady pulsating beat, house music that features the refrain “I still believe in a place called home” carries the dance along into electrifying displays of movement that are both grounded and euphoric. Individuals and small groups emerge, sail through space, then re-collect as part of the larger whole.

The amazing Matthew Rushing—whose performances have become purer and more mesmerizing over the years—is an outsider, or perhaps a leader. He seems to be the work’s conscience, or perhaps one expelled from the community. He absorbs the music with vivid precision and imbues each move with a spiritual dimension. It is wise that Harris, handed this assignment, avoided going in any dramatically specific direction. The work is so ongoing and communal in its drive that it is almost a shock when Linda Celeste Sims runs across the stage and jumps desperately into Glenn Allen Sims’ arms. This powerful moment of despair almost defies his approach—but it stuns.

Love Stories is back in the rep, serving as a program closer on those few performances that don’t include the eternally popular *Revelations*. The evocative opening solo of Jamison’s portion of the work is now danced by both men and women, and Alicia Graf Mack’s expansive limbs and unfurling phrases make it a very personal, reflective expression of the joy of dancing, capturing the tone of Stevie Wonder’s wistful “If it’s Magic.” *Love Stories* is awkward in its transitions from one section to the next, but is carried by the dancers’ high spirits and playful interactions.

New to Ailey this season is Battle’s brief, intriguing solo *Takedeme*, which matches swift, multi-directional movement to Indian vocalist Sheila Chandra’s rapid-fire delivery. Six different dancers (three men, three women) will perform it during the season. It’s fleet, funny and rather sexy, as danced with masterful articulation by Linda Celeste Sims at the performance I saw. But it will no doubt come across differently each time, since every Ailey dancer expresses strong individuality through movement and presence. How lovely that we have five weeks to get to know them all a bit better.