



A Fresh Breeze at Ailey: The Gift of Humor

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By Wendy Perron

Robert Battle's a funny guy, but even better than that, he's brought humor to the Ailey repertoire. Three of the four pieces on the "All New" program sparkled with wit.

First, Paul Taylor's *Arden Court*, which on opening night seemed a bit stiff (the 18th-century music by William Boyce is more formal than most Ailey fare), has now loosened up so the jokes are more visible. Or maybe I relaxed while looking at it a second time.

Kanji Segawa sprinted through Robert Battle's solo *Takademe* (1999), with all the precision and nifty feints I remember from 2002. The sharp changes from speedy gestures to deep breathing elicited chuckles. The piece is a gem that shines even more with Naren Budhakar singing Sheila Chandra's voice/tabla score live.

Minus 16, one of Ohad Naharin's brilliant collages of previous works, begins with a lone improviser taking the stage during intermission. Samuel Lee Roberts (formerly of BattleWorks) plays with the audience, with the proscenium, and with spectacularly timed dives and twists. He's an utter delight, leading us into the more serious sections like the explosive semi-circle of *Anaphaza* and the oddly touching duet *Mabul*. Naharin's choice of movements and his overall presentation—more exposed, more irregular—stretch these dancers to be more complex. The audience-participation section works like a charm; it stokes fun and laughter and a sense of community.

The world premiere, *Home* by Rennie Harris, didn't really have humor but it unleashed a torrent of gorgeous dancing. His juicy mix of hip hop and modern was absolutely exhilarating. As the protagonist, Matthew Rushing, now a guest artist, was sheer heaven. But all the dancers activated their spines and their attitude (as in street, not as in ballet) in a fresh way.

I realize that fun and humor are rare in concert dance in general, and the Ailey company does not escape that particular cloud. In fact, the Ailey rep has been so reverential toward its roots (understandably so) that it has become laden with over-earnestness. Battle is an earnest person too, especially when it comes to dance, but his personality has many facets. (Here's [my recent interview with him.](#)) I look forward to seeing how he brings different facets to the Ailey dancers too—while keeping the Ailey spirit alive. He's off to a great start.