

QUICK Q&A

Kyle Abraham

From Ailey to Wendy Whelan, the commissions keep coming.

Kyle Abraham's plate is more than full: His new work for Ailey opens Dec. 5, his latest piece for his company Abraham.In.Motion premiered Nov. 1, and he's getting started on a duet for the 2013 Wendy Whelan Project. Meanwhile, he's been going back to where it all began for him: the club. The 35-year-old choreographer spoke with associate editor Siobhan Burke about his latest projects in September.



So, how did you end up making a piece for Ailey? In 2010, Sylvia Waters asked me to make a work for Ailey II. Robert Battle was appointed that year, and he would come in and watch rehearsals. That same year, I got the Princess Grace Award, and Robert, also a Princess Grace recipient, was presenting the dance award. I remember him saying to the audience, "Keep an eye on this guy." I was just like, "Oh my god!" [Laughs.] Last October, I was on my way to L.A., and Robert called me as I was heading to the airport and he asked if I would like to make a new work for Ailey. Of course, I kind of lost it. I just started crying.

Do you feel a lot of pressure? Before I got into the studio in August, I had no idea that my work was the only world premiere this season. When I talked to my friends, they were like, "Man, I bet that makes you stressed out." But actually it made me feel confident, because Robert has that much faith in me to say, sight unseen, "Whatever you make is going to be good enough." That's so rare. I feel like in those situations, with a younger choreographer, they're more likely to select a piece they've already seen. For him to allow me to make a new piece—in a very, very short amount of time—that meant the world to me. He'd call me up on random occasions and ▶▶

▶▶ say, "I just wanna check in, because I just want you to know, you really can do whatever you wanna do."

How have you dealt with that freedom? I wanted to be smart about the audience, knowing there is such a huge core of Ailey followers. I don't want to alienate them by doing something too avant-garde. Some of the music I like, it's not that accessible to everyone. But even the music that I chose, Art Blakey's version of *A Night in Tunisia*, is not necessarily a safe choice. It's very bold. So I keep thinking about how I can do me to the best of my ability while keeping in mind who's watching. There are points of reference for an audience that might have a preexisting relationship with the company and then hopefully some new, wake-you-up moments.

Was working with the Ailey dancers different from working with your own company? Totally different. I say to any company, "If it doesn't feel good, we should change it, because I'm sure it doesn't look good." At Ailey, I don't think they were all comfortable telling me, "This doesn't make sense," or "I don't understand the transition," stuff like that, whereas with my dancers, we've spent so much time together that they know we can talk about it. One of my last days there, I wanted to just sit and talk. Those conversations about how everyone's feeling help me to finish a dance. They help the humanity aspect of the work, because regardless of what I'm making, we're still people. I think it was different from how they usually work in these three-week, make-it-happen situations.

What are you exploring in your new work for your company, *Pavement*? I'm telling you—I feel really, really good about this dance. It's inspired by two things, mainly: John Singleton's 1991 film *Boyz n the Hood* and the early

writings of W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). It's all set to opera music. Like most of my work, it has ties to Pittsburgh. I was thinking a lot about where I was at in 1991, where the city of Pittsburgh was in '91, and also this kind of diasporic question of where we might have been at the time of the writing of *Souls of Black Folk*.

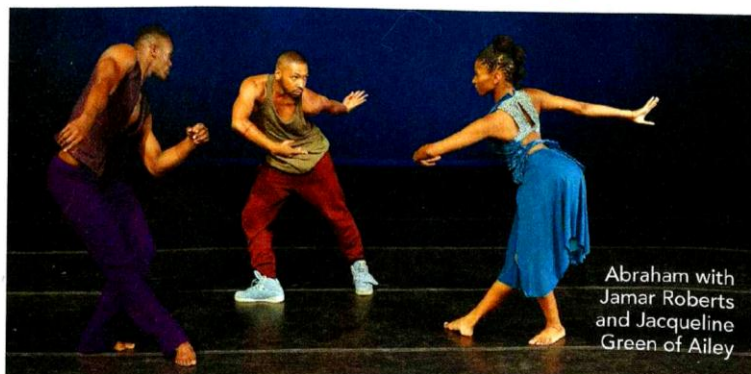
I've never had so much fun throughout the process of making a dance and felt so secure with where it's at right now. If I had to put it out tomorrow, I'd be fine with that.

I heard you're working with Wendy Whelan. True? This is very true. I need to email her. I'm glad you just said that. I'll text her today. We have to rehearse!

What was it like dancing with her in your first couple of rehearsals? It was great. She's a lot of fun—totally open. She makes herself a hundred percent available to work, and she's really focused. The first two rehearsals were more like a play date: Let's see which flavor of my movement vocabulary works best with you and your body. I want us to both feel like we've made something we're proud of. The goal for me is that we both feel heightened by the experience.

You started out dancing at raves in Pittsburgh. Do you still go out dancing just for fun? It's coming back into my life, for sure. I had this epiphany of sorts at a friend's wedding reception last summer. The music was on, and I just got up and started dancing and didn't stop. It would be like me and a 5-year-old. [Laughs.] I didn't care. I got really hungry for what that experience used to be for me, that rave time, totally uninhibited. So I've been trying to find more outlets for that. For my next project after *Pavement*, I'm still figuring out all the collaborators, but I can tell you we're gonna get down. ■

Left: Chris Cameron, Courtesy BAM. Right: Steven Schaefer, Courtesy Ailey



Abraham with Jamar Roberts and Jacqueline Green of Ailey

Left: Peter Docherty, Courtesy SB. Right: Paul Kunkin, Courtesy Ailey