

December 9, 2012

Steps in the right direction

DANCE

Ailey Premieres

City Center, New York

★★★★★

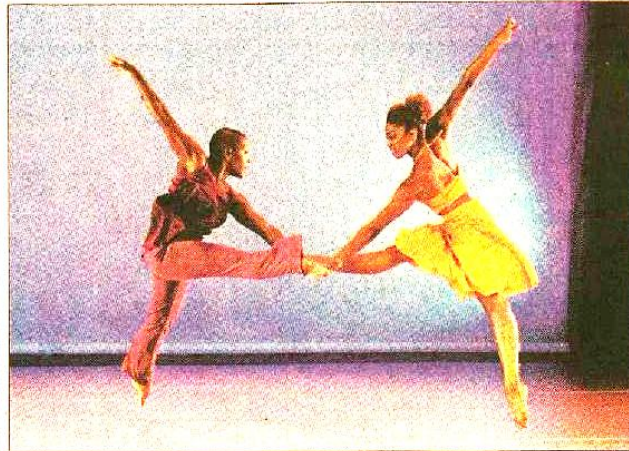
Apollinaire Scherr

When Judith Jamison retired in 2010 from what had become, under her two-decade leadership, one of the most popular dance companies in the world, some of us had already devised a wish list for her successor: what to keep and what to change.

A dancer during the Alvin Ailey group's tumultuous formative years who combined majesty and immediacy, Jamison the director both pushed her talented troupers to exhilarating heights and cultivated their individuality: no mean feat. But what she gave them to dance, beyond such great Ailey staples as *Revelations*, was another matter.

With the notable exception of Ronald K. Brown, the choreographers she commissioned tended to mythologise founder Alvin Ailey without fully understanding him. They focused on his celebration of black culture, his spiritualism and populism but neglected the underpinnings – the lyricism, the musical searching and, above all, the solid craft. The result could border on parody: “just folks” clichés, cold urban attitudinising, Broadway razzmatazz – take your pick – delivered in paint-by-number patterns. By the end of Jamison's tenure, you had to plan your Ailey visits carefully if you wanted to steer clear of dreck.

The organisation may be too massive and its base too large for rapid change, but beginning with his first season artistic director Robert Battle has been manoeuvring the company out of its quagmire. A thoughtful reassessment of its legacy



Let's party: Hope Boykin and Aisha Mitchell in 'Another Night' by Kyle Abraham

Paul Kolnik

that has little use for the usual categories seems to guide him.

Last year he imported modern dance legend Paul Taylor's lyrical *Arden Court*: a reminder that Ailey partakes in the modernist as much as the black tradition. This year's company premiere of Jamaican émigré Garth Fagan's *From Before* merges the two streams. The hypnotic 1978 piece filters Afro-Caribbean folk dance through a stark, sculptural lens: imagine Steve Reich's *Drumming* as a dance. One cluster of dancers enters as another departs in a flow of movement as constant as the beats in Trinidadian Ralph MacDonald's Calypso-inflected score. Meanwhile, the steps distil West Indian flourishes (the kick of the lower leg, the rock back on to the heels, the forward-backward pulse of the hips) to a percussive, undulant core.

As for commissions – the future – last year Battle updated Ailey's populist appeal with *Home* by the extraordinary hip-hop experimentalist Rennie Harris. This year the director took a risk on Kyle Abraham, a onetime member of the

Bill T. Jones company: not exactly in the Ailey line (though surprising correspondences exist in the men's biographies). But if the 34-year-old Abraham shares Jones's yen for deconstructive feints and self-conscious framing, you wouldn't know it from *Another Night*.

The party dance is a veritable genre at Ailey, but not the way Abraham does it. *Another Night* dispenses with the usual flimsy excuse of a plot and allows the glorious music – Dizzy Gillespie's “A Night in Tunisia” as rousingly interpreted by Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers – to direct the action. Decked out in Naoko Nagata's casual hip, the 10 dancers bring a playful air to the slipping, sliding, bounding steps by cueing each other with a glance or a nod like jazz musicians do. And when the music becomes like weather – pooling and hovering – the dancers withdraw beautifully into the steps.

Another Night ushered in not merely another night but a triumph for choreographer and director alike.

Until December 30, www.alvinailey.org