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Walter's World: Uptown Backs the Renaissance

By Walter Rutledge



We may be approaching the winter solstice, but there is definitely a breeze of springtime at the City Center Theater. It is provided by Uptown a new ballet by Matthew Rushing for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Uptown is true dance theater ensemble work, which chronicles the Harlem Renaissance.

The ballet opens with an old "Victrola" phonograph on stage in a single pool of light. The song No More Auction Block begins to play as a series of photographic images take us from slavery, through the northern migration, and to our final destination Harlem. This section is bravely void of dance becoming a visual overture.

We are introduced to Victor our narrator, masterfully portrayed by Amos J. Machanic, Jr. Victor takes us uptown guiding us through the streets, sights, and

sounds of the Harlem of the 1920's. It was as if the images found in the sepia toned James Van Der Zee photographs that captured that era were suddenly released.

The second and third sections entitled Welcome to Harlem and Rent Party are homage to the effervescent and raucous mood of uptown street life. The period costumes, set design, music, and most importantly the movement and staging immediately transport us back to the heyday of Harlem. The audience is treated to glimpses of the swing dances era, with its buoyant and exciting lifts.

Uptown takes a decided turn from an entertaining depiction to thought provoking social commentary in Great Minds. Mr. Rushing creates two contrasting solos set to the words of W.E.B. DuBois (himself) and Zora Neale Hurston (performed by Ruby Dee). His choice here is significant, these were two individuals whose writings and philosophies were from diametrically opposing points of view. Dr. DuBois represented the established intelligencia and promoted the Negro bourgeoisie, while Ms. Hurston preserved the stories of "simply folk" that had lived in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida. Performed by Vernard J. Gilmore and Briana Reed respectively both dancers embodied the timeless eloquence of these two formidable personalities.

In subsequent sections we visit the Savoy Ballroom with its battling bands, meet Florence Mills, Josephine Baker, Ethel Waters, and lament with Langston Hughes. We "shuffle along" and delight in the backstage antics of a Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle production. Eventually our guide Victor takes us to the Cotton Club for an elegant white tie and tails finale.

Uptown is a visual sensation, the innovative lighting, projections, props, sets and numerous costume changes keep this historic tribute fast paced



and engaging. Mr. Rushing has been able to retain a simplicity, and economy that keeps the work focused and concise. He is as much a director and he is a choreographer.

This is evident in the fact that he enlisted the talents of Clyde Wilder (swing dance consultant) and Hope Clarke (acting coach). “It was great to work with the company again”, states Hope Clarke. “They had never done anything like this before, and to give them something new was wonderful. They worked hard. The dancers learned something and so did I”.



The work harkens back an era when attention to detail and an understanding of intent were the hallmarks of dance theater. These were the principles great dance companies were founded upon. Mr. Rushing clearly understands this credo and has created a work, which exemplifies that canon.

“I truly believe that knowing your history equips current and future generations”, Mr. Rushing explains. “I want this piece to be fun, to be a celebration of the whole period and the heroes of that era”. In many respects this is a living history lesson, and should be shared with your entire family. It depicts an era when we celebrated and idolized the best within our community.

Uptown will be performed December 12, 29, 30 and January 1 in the evening performances, and December 13, 22, 26 and 27 in the matinee programs. For tickets call Citytix at 212- 581- 1212. You can purchase tickets on line at alvinaliey.org or nycitycenter.org. I urge everyone to take a trip downtown to experience Uptown.