

CALENDAR

FRIDAY, MARCH 20, 2009 • LATIMES.COM/CALENDAR



GO IN GRACE: Family Deshauteurs, center right, with Aisha Kahlil and the women of Sweet Honey in the Rock.

DANCE REVIEW

American life, in all its tenacious vitality

Exuberance erupts as the Alvin Ailey company brings its 50th anniversary celebration to L.A.

SARA WOLF

There was much to celebrate at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion on Wednesday night. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was in town to mark the company's 50th anniversary with a five-day run — reason enough for the sold-out crowd to be cheering — and Gloria Kaufman was in the house.

The sprightly philanthropist's ubiquitous presence on the local dance scene hasn't been as widely known about as, say, that of Jack Nicholson courtside at a Lakers home game, but that is set to change after this week's announcement of her \$20-million gift to support the Music Center's dance programming.

And so the evening began, as it would end, with an ebullient standing ovation by those who believe in the power of dancing not only to represent communities but also to bring them together.

This belief was the foundation of Ailey's vision. As Artistic Director Judith Jamison aptly put it in a brief opening film, he wanted to show "what wasn't there" on the concert dance stage: the talent of African American dancers and the many stories that make up the African American experience. But Ailey's dances are not only by and about the people but for them as well.

One wonders what he would make of the impressive, multi-pronged institution to which he gave birth. Could he, so keenly aware of how few opportunities were available to him and his friends back in 1950s New York City, have imagined that one day the company bearing his name would be dubbed a cultural ambassador to the world by Congress or — perhaps just as impressive an indicator of "making it" — have its own Barbie doll?

Doubtless he would beam proudly at the gifts of dancers such as Linda Celeste Sims, whose technical abilities in the "Fix Me, Jesus" duet of his "Revelations," which ended Wednesday's program, were superseded only by the deep yearning with which she imbued each leg extension and excruciatingly slow, signature backward fall into the embrace of Glenn Allen Sims.

She was equally magnetic in "Suite Otis," George Faison's 1971 tribute to the music of Otis Redding, matching her partner's firecracker-quick leaps and shifts in temperament in a lead duet with Los Angeles favorite son Matthew Rushing.

As its double-entendre title suggests, "Suite Otis" is a pink and bubbly mix of attitudes found in the ballet studio and on a club dance floor, with vintage "Soul Train" moves and costumes to match.

Longtime company member Renee Robinson left the audience aching for more in a too brief turn with Jamar Roberts, whose smooth gyrations set the tone for the piece, which also highlighted Roxanne Lyst, Kirven J. Boyd, Rachael McLaren, Chris Jackson, Vernard J. Gilmore, Tina Monica Williams, Clifton Brown and Con-

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Where: Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, 135 N. Grand Ave., L.A.

When: 7:30 tonight, 2 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday

Price: \$25 to \$105

Contact: (213) 365-3500

stance Stamatiou.

What might be called the Ailey recipe — heartfelt stories of broad appeal married to soulful music and, of course, phenomenal dancing — was amply on display in company member Hope Boykin's "Go in Grace," an anniversary-season collaboration with the renowned a cappella female vocal ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock, which opened the program.

It would be misleading to say the group merely accompanied the dance by performing live onstage. The women of Sweet Honey — Ysaye Maria Barnwell, Nitanju Bolade Casel, Aisha Kahlil, Carol Maillard, Louise Robinson and Shirley Childress Saxton — are too formidable, too lively for that. Instead, Boykin imaginatively interwove singers and dancers into a single ensemble, with the former narrating or kibbitzing like a Greek chorus or actively figuring in the story.

Boykin developed a shared gestural language grounded in Saxton's sign language interpretations. But unlike her inventive staging, this transliteration limited her options, frequently leaving the dancers to act out lyrics that sketched an

almost too picture-perfect outline of a happy family struggling to stay together.

Although it was clear that Boykin intended this domestic unit to be iconic, the too broad, generic strokes of the narrative drooped as it followed Rosalyn Deshauteurs as the daughter growing into womanhood, Rushing as the teenage son running off with his "boyz," and Amos J. Machanic Jr. as the patriarch who inexplicably drops dead.

Who could blame Rushing for joining up with Antonio Douthit and Boyd — too clean-cut to read as anything more threatening than friends — when Boykin gave the pair such a fun, syncopated, stage-engulfing phrase that was so much more dynamic than the earnest lyricism of the rest of "Go in Grace"? And Robinson, as the mother, is simply too accomplished a dancer for a role requiring her to do little more than shadow Machanic.

Universal, specific

Some have said that the company, seemingly at the height of its technical prowess, deserves more challenging choreography. No doubt if he were still with us, Ailey would delight in Boykin's instinct for the architecture of bodies on the stage. But one imagines he might also advise the young choreographer to dig deeper into her "blood memories" for stories that, in their specificity, would ring out as loudly universal as the masterful "Revelations."

Nearing the half-century mark, it continues to reveal not by preaching but through dancing.

calendar@latimes.com