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DANCING THE NIGHT AWAY

Movers and Shakers at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Opening Night Gala

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By Charlotte Lytton

With the holidays fast approaching, nothing brings us pirouetting into the snowflake season quite like the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT). At Wednesday's Opening Night Gala, the limbs were flying around the stage with unfettered aplomb, flitting from grace to gusto whilst set to solos from the company's A-List pals **Anika Noni Rose**, **Brian Stokes Mitchell** and **Jessye Norman**.

Now in its 54th year, the group's rich cultural history was made evident throughout the selection of pieces performed throughout the evening, in particular *Revelations*, which was initially choreographed by Mr. Ailey himself. The piece had a special significance for Ms. Noni Rose, who told *The Observer*: "The AAADT was the first ballet that I saw, and *Revelations* was the piece that stuck in my mind so strongly. So it was a huge honor to be asked to perform here tonight – it was like the circle closed for me."

The opening was also something of a landmark for dancer **Renee Robinson**, who was hand-picked by the company's namesake some 32 years ago. Ms. Robinson is hanging up her dancing shoes this Christmas – for the AAADT at least. Speaking of her three decades with the company, she said, "What feels great is not only that I was chosen by Mr. Ailey, but that I had the opportunity to work under him and hear him speak about his vision and his legacy."

"Over the years, the changes that have happened within the company have stemmed from the wonderful seed Ailey planted, and that's what keeps it alive, current and important to society all over the world," she continued. The only dancer to work under all three of the AAADT's artistic directors (Mr. Ailey, Judith Jamison and Robert Battle, who currently holds the post), there is no denying that Ms. Robinson knows what the job entails better than anyone. So has she become a mother hen-type figure to the dancers finding their feet in the company? "Oh no," she laughed, "I'm more like the fun aunt!"

Fun was certainly had by all throughout the evening, from the standing ovation at the performance's close to hundreds of guests hitting the Hilton's dance floor for some Beyoncé-esque booty-shaking before the meal began. Academy Award winner and stand-up comic **Mo'Nique** had the crowd eating out of the palm of her hand during a speech mid-show, and continued to bolster the party atmosphere as the event went on. A long-time AAADT supporter, she told us, "Whenever the group would come to whatever city I was living in at the time, me and my family would go out and see them, and you just felt every movement and every step, every lyric, you felt everything they put into their performances. So when they called and asked me to be involved tonight, it was like – 'For real? Of course!,'" she enthused.

Widespread involvement in the event was key, with a sublime number in the first half of the show causing quite the stir. As the stern looking company made their way into the audience, apparently selecting ball-gown toting spectators at random, things appeared to be far slicker by the time they reached the stage. Seamlessly moving from the roles of confused audience members to pro-shakers, this additional cast proved that age and physique don't stand in front of a real dancer's ability to move, and the piece was precisely the effervescent exhibition of skill that the AAADT has become renowned for.

The dancing continued well into the night, with gala guests evidently inspired by what they had seen earlier on stage. With a jazz band on hand to bust out everybody's favorite Motown tunes, and the hotel's ballroom decorated like a sparkly winter wonderland, the AAADT brought a slice of Christmassy cheer to New York in a celebration of which Mr. Ailey himself would've undoubtedly been proud.



Honorary Chair Mo'Nique.
Photo by Dario Calmese