

The New York Times

THE Arts

THE NEW YORK TIMES, THURSDAY, JUNE 5, 2008

A Pageant of Early Aileys on a Journey to Posterity

New York audiences are so used to the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's annual winter appearances at City Center that the idea of finding the company

DANCE REVIEW

ROSLYN
SULCAS

at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in June is positively disconcerting. But it was resident at the Brooklyn Academy from 1969 to 1971, and the fit seems natural — or so thought the Joyce Theater directors who are presenting the Ailey company's short run this week.

They were right. A packed, wildly enthusiastic house greeted the company — which has not performed in a Brooklyn theater for over two decades — in a program titled "Classic Ailey." All the works come from the early part of Alvin Ailey's career. "Night Creature" and "Pas de Duke," both to music by Duke Ellington, were choreographed in 1974 and 1976; "Masekela Langage," in 1969, and "Revelations," which rightly made Ailey's name, in 1960.

"Masekela Langage," set to the music of the South African jazz musician Hugh Masekela, was first performed in its entirety at the company's first season at the Brooklyn Academy, and it hasn't been seen in New York since 1998. That's surprising, since it is a truly fine work that shows Ailey's gift for transmuting emotional drama into movement with pitch-perfect timing and theatrical flair. There isn't a wasted gesture or step, and to the great credit of the Ailey dancers (and those who teach and rehearse them), they are rarely self-indulgent with material that could easily be overstated.

The program notes describe the setting as a South African shebeen — a rough-hewn township bar, illegal during the apartheid years — and a poster of the South African bush swings above

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will perform through Sunday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, 30 Lafayette Avenue, at Ashland Place, Fort Greene, (718) 636-4100, bam.org.



ERIN BAIANO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Renee Robinson and Clifton Brown, center, and other Ailey dancers in "Masekela Langage."

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Brooklyn Academy of Music

the stage, which is populated by stools, wicker chairs and a jukebox. But visually alone this setting felt entirely un-South African, as did the costumes and manner of the dancers.

That hardly matters. The performers represent desperate people, anywhere, and Ailey, who grew up in a dirt-poor town, Rogers, Tex., is clearly alluding to the "apartheid" in the lives of Americans. The piece opens as the dancers, seated in the chairs along the front of the stage, gaze out blankly and hopelessly. It ends in the same way, a dead man's body, ignored, sprawled at their feet.

Between these tableaux come a series of dances, perfectly attuned to Mr. Masekela's languid jazzy lines and township jive rhythms. A woman (the marvelous Linda Celeste Sims who also shone in "Pas de Duke") jumps into a searing, lashing solo, angrily pushing away the men she has summoned. A man (Clifton Brown) in a Panama hat — a

preacher? a demagogue? a politician? — briefly tries to rouse the others from their torpor. Another woman (Renee Robinson) is the most disturbing of all, her eyes haunted, her face empty as she moves haltingly at center stage. And then a man (Matthew Rushing), blood spattered over his white shirt, lurches in to die among them. Life, unchanged, goes on implacably.

Some of the social dance references — a snaking up-close conga line, jitterbugging couples — in "Masekela Langage" also appear in "Night Creature," a frothy confection that shows Ailey's ability to blend dance styles seamlessly. Alicia J. Graf was her mesmerizing self in the

central role, an alluring spider drawing all the others into her web. And Kirven J. Boyd shone in a tricky balletic section that combines small jumps — feet crossing and beating in the air — with large-scale abandon.

What is left to say about "Revelations" that hasn't been said? When you see it often enough, you can think there is nothing left to see anew. Tuesday night proved me wrong. When Ms. Robinson sashayed forward in "Wading in the Water," the white fringes of her parasol fluttering in the air, her white dress swaying, the blue panels of fabric undulating behind her, there was a moment of pure movement, pure magic.