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'Ailey Highlights': above, from left, Tina Monica Williams, Yannick Lebrun and Constance Stamatou in "Phases"; and Linda Celeste Sims, below, in "The Lark Ascending."

Soaring Through the Ailey Catalog Before Reaching 'Revelations'

Blink and you'll miss it. That's how briskly the seamless program of dances compiled for "Ailey Highlights" flies by.

For its 20th anniversary season, celebrated last year, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater created an excerpt-a-thon of works, all restaged by the associate artistic director, Masazumi Chaya. ("Revelations," presented in its entirety, concludes the program.) On Tuesday night "Highlights" returned to City Center with one notable absence, the breathtaking "Three Black Kings." Strangely enough, it was a relief that the music used this time around was recorded. It may sound better live, but with no musicians to crowd the back of the stage, the dancers have ample

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater continues through Jan. 3 at City Center, 131 West 55th Street, Manhattan; (212) 581-1212 or alvinailey.org.

room to move, and in this company, they move with vehemence.

The storybook opens with "Blues Suite" (1958), which pays homage to Ailey's Southern roots; before the curtain rises there are sounds of bells and a rolling train. Onstage the vintage barrelhouse setting includes

With ample room to move, dancers give a highlights tour.

stools, a ladder and an assemblage of characters, who despite the song "Good Morning Blues," seem to be in for a long night. The male duet from "Streams" (1970) follows, showcasing Clifton Brown and Matthew Rushing in a competitive pas de deux full of generous tilting extensions, in which a shift of the hips rearranges

the body into an arabesque.

Six women in flowing, colorful dresses led by Hope Boykin and Rosalyn Deshauteurs perform the enchanting, if too brief, "Country Girls" section of "Choral Dances" (1971). In "The Lark Ascending" (1972), Linda Celeste Sims, the company's most lyrical and natural dancer, flutters her arms like wings and spirals from one side of the stage to another in a glittering array of chaînés, a sequence of turns on demi-point. Later, in "Landscape" (1981), Ms. Sims, whose sensual harmony is astounding, strings together Ailey's balletic steps as if movement were liquid.

In "Hidden Rites" (1973), which Ailey described as a battle of the sexes, Khilea Douglass and Vernard J. Gilmore go on the attack in a forceful display evoking a mythical world. Briana Reed, in "Cry" (1971), struggles with the ruffles of her white skirt and with stamina; there are glimpses of power in her solo, but she never seems on top of it. Yannick Lebrun, with

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his elegant line, stands out in "Movement II" of "Night Creature" (1974), and "Phases" (1980). More and more, he is becoming the dancer you notice in a crowd.

The program ends with "Revelations," Ailey's 1960 masterpiece. That wasn't the only reason it felt so satisfying in comparison to the selection of excerpts: with a beginning, middle and an end, it was whole.

As a primer, "Ailey Highlights" serves a purpose. It demonstrates many compelling facets of Ailey's choreography, from its theatrical ingenuity to his sly and sophisticated way of arranging steps. The petit allegro section set to Duke Ellington in 1974's "Night Creature" is forever beguiling. But the shortened form is also exasperating. Perhaps that's the point of "Ailey Highlights": it's a glimpse to leave you wanting more.

