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Showing the Pain of Love and Life That Goes Way Beyond Words

A fair number of people leaped to their feet on Wednesday night at City Center, as Samuel Lee Roberts turned his back on the audience and walked into the darkness that heralded the end of Robert Battle's "In/Side." The solo had just officially entered the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater repertory, but it was created for Mr. Roberts last year for a program at Dance New Amsterdam, and he has danced it subsequently with Mr. Battle's company.

It's no wonder then, that Mr. Roberts so perfectly inhabits the tortured spirit that animates "In/Side," set to Nina Simone's haunting recording of "Wild Is The Wind." (The song, by Dimitri Tiomkin and Ned Washington, was originally recorded by Johnny Mathis for the 1957 film of the same name.)

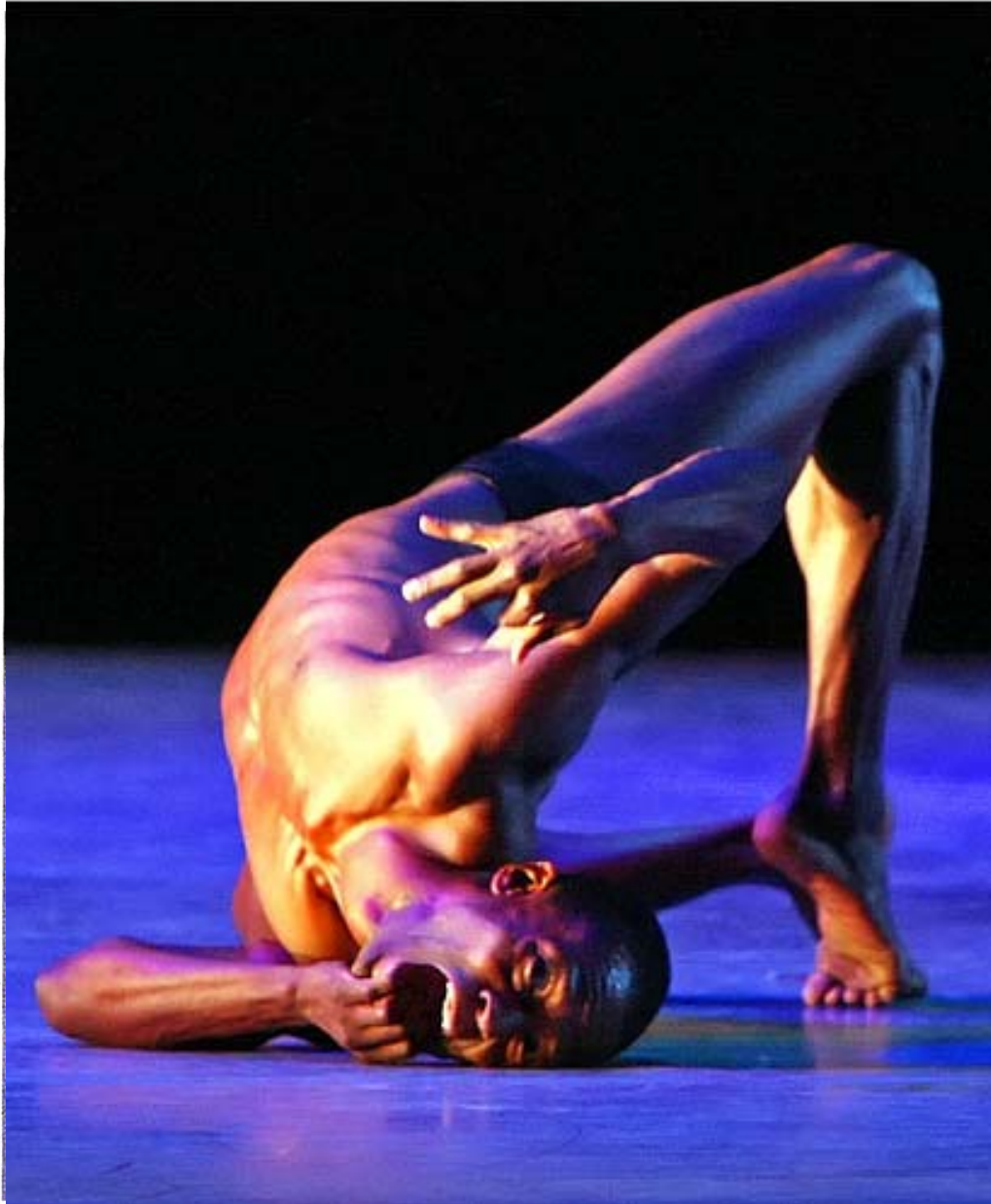
Mr. Roberts, a tall, impressively muscular man clad only in a pair of briefs, has an imposing physique that provides an ultimately touching contrast to the almost childlike mental terror that animates his dancing in the piece and informs his lurching, angled, stretched-out gestures with consistent power.

Mr. Battle doesn't really choreograph to the music; nor do its lyrics — an impassioned plea to a lover — provide the story of the solo. Instead he uses it to great theatrical effect as an emotive aural layer, while the extreme, knotty movement suggests a soul damaged by more than romantic entanglements.

That movement, always inventive, borders on the melodramatic: there are many abrupt contorted positions on the floor (one leg hooked back, head thrown back, mouth open in a silent scream); audible little cries; anguished reaching arms. This unrelenting emotive pressure might become wearisome with a lesser performer, but Mr. Roberts carried it off. As he shambled away at the end, he seemed a man broken by the howling wilderness of his spirit, a creature lost to himself and to us.

Mr. Battle is a skilled choreographer, and "In/Side" is a worthy

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



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Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Samuel Lee Roberts performing the solo work "In/Side," choreographed by Robert Battle, at City Center.

addition to the Ailey repertoire. But it also feels very much an Ailey company piece in its slightly exhibitionistic exaltation of the dancer, and its emotive audience appeal. These elements were all present to different degrees in the other works on the program: Alvin Ailey's 1958 "Blues Suite" (with the magnificent live playing and singing of Kenny Brawner and the Brawner Brothers), "Revelations" from 1960 and George Faison's 1971 "Suite Otis," to the music of Otis Redding).

In the Ailey masterpiece "Revelations" the dancerly display in "I Wanna Be Ready" or "Sinner Man" is part of the meaning of the work, just like the sassy attitude of the women in "Rocka My Soul." In the earlier, more secular "Blues Suite," there are many moments — both choreographic and thematic — that foreshadow

Nina Simone's unmistakable voice haunts a new work by Robert Battle.

"Revelations," but the piece also lays the template for the push-over macho guy and the feisty dominating woman that pervade much of the Ailey repertoire.

"Suite Otis" follows that template faithfully and with almost no originality or verve. It's the kind of work in which everyone hits a position on the first note of each bar (arm up, two three; kick, two three; turn, two three), and in which every number ends in a fade-out with a couple or group moving offstage. (It's also as pinkly costumed, by Mr. Faison, as a synthetically colored cake, and about as brain-achingly sweet.)

Even in "Suite Otis" the Ailey dancers offer a generous, direct communication with the audience that is one of the company's great strengths and goes a long way toward explaining its immense popularity. On this program, at least, the choreography mostly repaid that investment of energy.

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