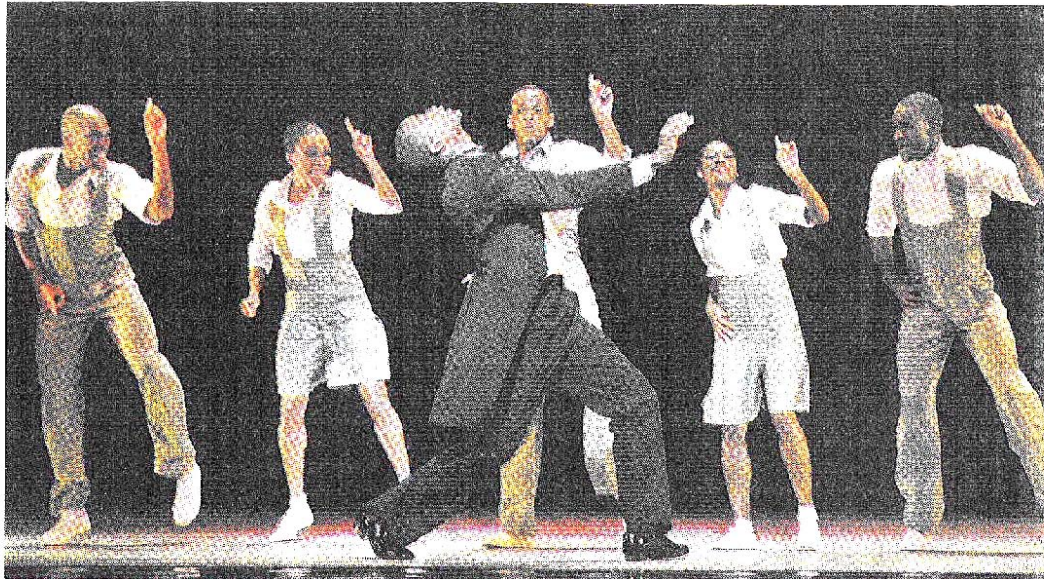


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ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Amos J. Machanic Jr., front, in the premiere of Matthew Rushing's "Uptown" at City Center.

The Harlem of Inspired Hearts and Minds

At the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Matthew Rushing is a dancer of great spirit and charm, and in his new work for the company, "Uptown," first performed on Wednesday night at City Center, there is plenty of both.

DANCE REVIEW

GIA KOURLAS

At times the production, which pays tribute to the Harlem Renaissance in nine scenes, is less a dance than a research project — this is when it wanes, but it's not often — or a workshop for a Broadway musical. Its narrative centerpiece is Victor, played by Amos J. Machanic Jr., who creates a suave presence as he speaks with zest about the period. Throughout, he has our eyes, our ears and, most surprising, our trust.

Mr. Rushing begins the work — part of a program including

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater City Center

Ulysses Dove's throbbing (and grating) "Episodes" and Ailey's "Revelations" — with a poignant recording of "No More Auction Block for Me" by Paul Robeson as vintage images are projected on the back of the stage.

Dancers in handsome period costumes, designed by Mr. Rushing, Jon Taylor and Dante Baylor, bring a 1920s snapshot of Harlem to life in a swirling and sassy introduction to the Harlemites. "Uptown" is full of historical references; in "Rent Party" the cast whips through Mr. Rushing's witty reconstructions of swing dances, in which body flips are effortless and electrifying.

But as Victor notes, the renaissance was also about intellect. An interview with W. E. B. DuBois plays while Vernard J. Gilmore performs a jagged solo, his fingers pointing in the air (as DuBois makes his points). Briana Reed flitters back and forth on a stool dur-

ing a recading from Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God." And later Clifton Brown, in "Weary Blues," mirrors his solemn movement to Langston Hughes's poem about a blues performer. The idea of such movement meditations isn't misguided, but Mr. Rushing's approach is somewhat pedantic.

At the Savoy Ballroom, Florence Mills (Linda Celeste Sims), Josephine Baker (Rosalyn Deshauteurs) and Ethel Waters (Tina Monica Williams) come to life in mini-portraits. Ms. Sims reappears in "Shuffle Along," auditioning for a role in that black musical. Frightened and ebullient, she has never been funnier.

Naturally, the final stop is the Cotton Club, where the cast of 15, now dressed in elegant white, performs to Ted Rosenthal's "Uptown." Here the sweet pulse of couples meeting in a reimagined club is anticlimactic: too abrupt, too ordinary. So much else of Mr. Rushing's glittering love letter to the Harlem Renaissance is anything but.

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