



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performing in an excerpt of "Memoria" at City Center on Wednesday.

## One Foot in the Present Season, One Foot in the Past

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is 50 years old. Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg proclaimed Dec. 4 Alvin Ailey Day in New York; Gov. David A. Paterson has honored the company on behalf of the State of New York; and the United States Congress has called it the nation's cultural ambassador to the world. Riding high on this wave of achievement, the troupe opened its annual five-week season at New York City Center on Wednesday evening with the best gala I have attended in decades.

"You must enjoy every moment of this," declared Judith Jamison, the company's artistic director. No other director today makes curtain speeches remotely as stirring as Ms. Jamison does, and on Wednesday she was in her most thrilling form. She was well aware of the multifaceted nature of the history of which she spoke. Proudly she spoke of the company's past, gently she connected its African-American element to its transcendent success, and then, almost as if in passing, she linked this to the election of the first black president of the United States.

The applause had already been rising like a tide; now it seemed like a river breaking its banks; at which point Ms. Jamison, her voice riding over the audience like a surfer on an ocean wave, announced, "You must enjoy every moment of this." It was impossible to know whether she meant every moment of the gala, or every moment of the Ailey company's overall achievement, or every moment of the Obama election and presidency — why separate them?

### ALASTAIR MACAULAY

#### DANCE REVIEW

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Linda Celeste Sims of Alvin Ailey in an excerpt from "Cry."

### Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater New York City Center

Oprah Winfrey, looking glorious, also spoke, very nearly as excitingly and to the great delight of the audience. Warmly exuding a full sense of the historic occasion, she called dance "the transcendent mother tongue of the world." As if to prove this, she cited the astounding numbers: the 48 American states and 71 foreign countries where the Ailey dancers have appeared, the 21 million spectators who have watched Ailey performances.

Yet not even these speeches nor the evening's excellent dancers (who included children from the Ailey school) provided the two most memorable aspects of Wednesday's gala. One occurred at the end. The audience had cheered Ailey's always knockout "Revelations" to the echo, and Ms. Jamison joined her dancers

onstage to acknowledge the applause. Suddenly she turned her back on the audience, and the dancers turned with her. A photograph of Ailey himself (who died in 1989) appeared on the backdrop. In tribute, dancer after dancer laid bouquets in a pile before the picture then quietly left the stage. Ms. Jamison waited until last, briefly knelt while laying her own bouquet, then followed into the wings. End of gala.

The other aspect was the quality of the live music in "Revelations." Here is the greatest theme of this five-week season: music. Eighteen performances will feature live music, including eight of "Revelations" and four of "Blues Suite." The Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and Wynton Marsalis will accompany six performances (two programs) of Ailey's own choreography to Duke Ellington music, and "Go in Grace," a new work by the company dancer Hope Boykin, will be accompa-

nied by the female a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock live onstage. Ailey early in his career recognized what a difference great live music can make to dance; this season heroically declares its value.

This "Revelations" was amazing to hear because it showed how many ways gospel, spiritual and African-American religious music can be sung. Authenticity isn't the point: there are many mansions in this music's house. Ella Mitchell and the Riverside Inspirational Choir have often accompanied "Revelations," as they will several times this season, and on Wednesday they were tremendous; in particular the beauty of Marion Moore's singing in "Sinner Man" was the marvel I recalled from last year. Richard Smallwood, Lalah Hathaway, Darius de Haas and Billy Porter all made solo vocal contributions that were both individual and idiomatic.

And the operatic diva Jessye Norman, a singer I first adored in recital 34 years ago, sang "Fix Me, Jesus." Here and there you could hear the traces of the years in her singing — not every note is in tune, and some spread as they used not to — and always that high solemnity that has (sometimes absurdly) long characterized her art. Yet you could only marvel at the full-bodied purity of her voice: every part of her, from head to toe, seems to convert into perfectly focused vocal tone and to coolly commanding expressive vehemence. She made only a brief appearance at curtain calls, applauding the dancers, apparently laughing in delight to be a part of a night so historic. You must enjoy every moment of this. Who could fail to?