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Review: Alvin Ailey vibrant as ever, thrills with classics and new work

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By Stephanie Bussell

“I believe that dance came from the people and that it should always be delivered back to the people,” said Alvin Ailey. His esteemed Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is one of the most highly celebrated dance companies in the world probably for that very reason — they know how to engage an audience. Under new direction by Robert Battle, the third person to head the company since 1958, Alvin Ailey is as vibrant as ever.



Battle, a frequent choreographer and artist-in-residence at Ailey since 1999, brings freshness to the troupe's repertory, which now includes more recent works and not only the museum pieces Charleston has seen in past years. Although “Arden Court,” choreographed by Paul Taylor, feels its 31 years, the dancers brought to it the athleticism and grace they are so well known for. Set to William Boyce's Baroque-sounding score, “Arden Court” is a series of duets, trios and other groupings of three women and six men.

Taylor's choreography does not suit everyone and the men's choreography in particular for “Arden Court” can be awkward at times. However, the Ailey dancers contrasted male and female energies beautifully with the strongest moments happening towards the middle of the piece, particularly in the series of duets.

The dancers seemed to inhabit “Home,” choreographed by Rennie Harris, much more comfortably. Coined “the Basquiat of the U.S. contemporary dance scene,” Harris creates a more subtle physicality than the broad athleticism Ailey is known for.

“Home,” created in 2011, was inspired by stories of people fighting HIV. Combining hip-hop and pedestrian vernacular, Harris' choreography creates an internal fire that alternates between just barely escaping the dancers and fully bursting forth.

You can almost feel the layers of emotion each of the dancers abstract. Moments of fragility amidst discord create a powerful effect.

Battle's piece “In/Side,” created in 2008, is haunting and personal. With Nina Simone singing “Wild is the Wind,” dancer Yannick Lebrun (one of Dance Magazine's “25 to Watch” in 2011) evokes gut-wrenching, raw emotion.

While filled with struggle, “In/Side” serves as an expression of a broken human spirit renewed. Dressed only in briefs with minimal staging, Lebrun can hide behind nothing. It takes an artist to pull off a piece like this, and Lebrun exposed the vulnerability and strength a lesser performer could not.

Last but not least, “Revelations,” Ailey's signature masterwork, is a staple and permanent finale fixture for a reason. Each generation of Ailey dancers brings a freshness and reverence to the piece that, as usual, brought the Galliard audience to its feet.