

The Star-Ledger

Alvin Ailey dancers perform contemporary gems by Fagan, Kylián and Abraham

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By Robert Johnson

NEW YORK—A shaman casts a spell in “From Before,” the legendary dance by choreographer Garth Fagan, which Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has revived this season at NY City Center.

Stepping out of Fagan’s stunning composition based on Afro-Caribbean themes, Jamar Roberts approaches the lip of the stage and, addressing you—yes, you there sitting in the dark—he seeds the air with his fingers. This gesture unleashes magic forces—juju—which float overhead in a mystical cloud, a blessing from the watchful ancestors who safeguard our inheritance.

The poignant moment contains so much that is Ailey. Serenely balanced in Fagan’s work or stretched taut in Jirí Kylián’s “Petite Mort,” another company premiere, and then hanging loose in “Another Night,” a terrific, new piece by Kyle Abraham, the Ailey dancers always connect. The troupe has its own enchantment. As a repertory company, it preserves a heritage of artistic treasures that it serves fresh to new generations.

“From Before” (1978) marked a watershed in Fagan’s thinking about Afro-Caribbean dance. Dressing his dancers in leotards, he stripped away the raffia and Cowrie-shell stereotypes to reveal a powerfully modern language. Yet with its tender couples, wandering adventurers and matriarchs this dance also portrays a community. Bravura is intrinsic to Fagan’s style, offering choice roles to stars like Roberts—amazing in hinged backbends—and Linda Celeste Sims, fluent and joyous as she embodies Caribbean womanhood. The company’s youngsters exult yet dance with marvelous precision, especially Kelly Robotham and Yannick Lebrun.

Sex is a matter of life and death in “Petite Mort.” Corseted and circumscribed by the fencing foils whose steel blades curl around their bodies, the dancers seem pierced by desire. The men slash the air ferociously with their weapons, and drawing a silken sheet they cover the stage in a momentary blackout like a loss of consciousness. The women lie prone before them, or enter the fencing ground determined and indifferent to the threat of violence. The mens’ heads roll and their hands flutter between the women’s legs.

Release is what they crave (“Petite mort” means “orgasm”), but despite repeated contractions in the course of six duets the dance never loses its urgency. Like its tickling Mozart score, spontaneous-looking movements when a person kicks a sword are just a tease as the blade rolls or falls exactly into place. Detaching themselves from stiff ball-gowns accentuates the women’s nakedness and vulnerability.

Snacking on junk food is not allowed on-stage during Abraham’s “Another Night.” When a bag of munchies appears, a woman impatiently snatches it away. Unlike his “Pavement” last month at the Harlem Stage Gatehouse, where a face-stuffing binge signaled despair, “Another Night” is a happy dance celebrating the nightclub culture that produced Dizzy Gillespie’s “A Night in Tunisia.”

Jacqueline Green leads the revels leaning softly into the music, but this sprightly and good-humored piece has many delightful soloists including the intensely musical Kirven James Boyd and effervescent Hope Boykin. Abraham’s precocious choreography comes packed with surprises, yet wisely—and all kidding aside—he has sculpted it with a keen sense of economy.



Jamar Roberts in Garth Fagan's 'From Before'. *Paul Kolnik*

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Where: New York City Center, 55th St. between Sixth and Seventh Aves.

When: Tues.-Wed. and Sun. at 7:30 p.m., Thurs.-Sat. at 8 p.m., with matinees Sat. at 2 p.m. and Sun. at 3 p.m., through Dec. 30.

How Much: \$25-\$135; call (212) 581-1212 or visit nycitycenter.org