

On White House Stage, Space Is Constrained; Imagination Is Not

WASHINGTON — “Dance is the soul of this nation!” Judith Jamison, artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, exclaimed on Tuesday afternoon in the East

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Room of the White House, at the end of a performance in her honor. Addressing her host, Michelle Obama, Ms. Jamison continued, “Your vision helps us sustain the heartbeat of what this country is about.”

Ms. Jamison, who is retiring from her Ailey position next June, is so juicily enjoyable an orator that the first lady’s team could do worse than to hire her as a speechwriter. Mrs. Obama herself spoke charmingly on the same stage, perfectly fitting her words and tone to an enthusiastic occasion: the first performance in a planned dance series, matching performances in music, poetry and other arts that the Obamas have already hosted at the White House.

The director of the occasion was another enthusiast, Damian Woetzel, former New York City Ballet star and a member of the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. The Obamas are known admirers of the Ailey company; Tuesday’s performance, which featured five other companies, began and ended with Ailey highlights.

New York dancegoers take pride in City Center’s annual Fall for Dance season, which combines different styles in one program for familiar and unfamiliar highlights. Tuesday’s event, introduced by Mr. Woetzel, could have been called First Family Fall for Dance: little that dance connoisseurs haven’t already



DOUG MILLS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Linda Celeste Sims, performing “Cry” by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, was among the dancers in the East Room of the White House Tuesday in the first of a planned dance series.

seen many times, but a happy introduction to American dance’s variety. The president wasn’t present, but I hope he got to see a video later in the day.

The four main choreographers represented were Ailey (excerpts from the solo “Cry” and the group dance “Revelations”), George Balanchine (the “Tarantella” pas de deux), Paul Taylor (a male quartet from “Cloven Kingdom”) and Twyla Tharp (a duet from “Nine Sinatra Songs”). But the program also included the break dancers of Super Cr3w and the “Electricity” solo from “Billy Elliot the Musical.” The

first lady was first to her feet after this, leading a standing ovation for young Dayton Tavares, who shares the show’s title role on Broadway.

The East Room stage pinches most dance three-dimensionally. Jump too far and you’ve gone off-stage; jump too eagerly upstage and you hit the wall; jump too high and you hit one of the room’s three colossal chandeliers. The “Rocka My Soul” finale of Ailey’s best-known hit, “Revelations,” was performed with just five (instead of nine) couples. Ashley Boudier and Danjel Ulbricht of New York City Ballet could easily

dance “Tarantella” on a stage ten times as large but adjusted the work’s exuberance with real skill and pizzazz.

The most pinching effect wasn’t the stage but the gala-like format: a collection of highlights meant to make an impact more athletic than artistic. “Electricity” and the “Revelations” excerpts are exciting, but you wouldn’t know from this arrangement that they have a much larger expressive impact in context. Still, the action-packed nature of Ms. Tharp’s choreography worked well in the “Forget Domani” duet: even though that

is not the greatest excerpt from “Nine Sinatra Songs,” it fills every musical phrase with such abundant physical variety that, as danced here by the Washington Ballet’s Morgann Frederick and Jonathan Jordan, it fascinates.

The single dance that best demonstrated the artistic imagination of American dance was the quartet from Mr. Taylor’s “Cloven Kingdom.” Four men in tails and tie start to dance to the baroque music of Corelli, and then, like a visceral undercurrent, the soundtrack changes to percussion music by Malloy Miller and the performers reveal the pounding, coursing, acrobatic animal dimensions within their elegant composure. Though, like the other pieces, “Cloven Kingdom” is yet greater when seen as a whole, this dance has an audacious oddity and poetic drama that more than survive being seen alone.

The highlight of the afternoon, however, was not the performances but the class beforehand for nearly 100 students from schools across America. They were led enchantingly by Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, co-director of the Ailey company’s Arts in Education program.

Mrs. Obama never saw the most memorable part of the inaugural dance event: these children trying out adult choreography and being given the kind of instruction that would easily fire their souls as well as their bodies. Many of them were in the audience for the performance. And as that ended, Mrs. Obama told them, “If you’ve done it here in the White House, you can do it anywhere.”