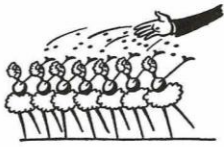


# THE NEW YORKER

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EAST ROOM RECITAL

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“We could hear you, a little bit, upstairs,” Michelle Obama said, one day last month, to the eighty children pulling down their leotard elastics over their small rear ends in the East Room of the White House. When she walked onstage, what looked like eighty children took pictures of her with their cell phones. What? The people back home weren’t going to have documentary evidence that their kid went to the White House, or get to see what the First Lady wore? (A knee-length white dress dappled with black and cinched with a big silver belt.)

The show, suavely m.c.’d by the former New York City Ballet dancer Damian Woetzel, was a tribute to Judith Jamison, the director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. Next year, Jamison is retiring, having succeeded Ailey when he died, twenty-one years ago, and having kept the company in high polish ever since. Jamison—with her shaved head and, on her famously majestic body, a floating business of white and pink—glided around the room, greeting her friends.

The opening part of the program, the one that could be heard upstairs, consisted of workshops for the kids, the first led by Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, of the Ailey company. Like all workshop directors, Thomas-Schmitt gave the participants phrases to perform, but she also explained what the steps might mean about life. She asked the children what an ensemble dance was, as opposed to a solo. “What do you expect a group to do?” she said. And she answered, “To support each other.” At another point, having taken the children through “I Been ’Buked,” the opening section of Ailey’s celebrated “Revelations,” she asked them what it meant to be ’buked, or rebuked. “It means that people say to you, ‘You can’t do that,’” she explained. The show was a political as well as an artistic event. Of the students assembled—

from the Ailey School, Ballet Hispanico, the Cab Calloway School of the Arts, Dance Theatre of Harlem, Interlochen Center for the Arts, the Washington School of Ballet, the Chicago Multi-Cultural Dance Center, the National Dance Institute, and the Philadelphia High School for Creative and Performing Arts—perhaps three-quarters or more were not white, a percentage that does not reflect the demographics in this country’s dance schools.

After the workshops and a snack break came the performances, by professionals. Looking at the list of pieces, you guessed instantly: The program must have started out all-Ailey. Then someone in charge said, “We can’t do that—it makes the show look narrow. We have to include everybody.” So the program was a big mishmash: one dance each by five companies—New York City Ballet, the Paul Taylor Dance Company, the Washington Ballet, the company of “Billy Elliot the Musical,” and Super Cr3w, a b-boy group. That justice having been done, four slots on the program were given to the Ailey troupe.

The performers worked against considerable odds. The First Lady should be told that, apart, perhaps, from a broom closet in Union Station, there is no space in Washington more hostile to the performing of dance than the East Room of the White House. First, it has no stage. The dancers were placed on a small temporary platform, and, as practically all their faces showed, they were terrified of falling off. Then, there’s the problem that, with no incline in the seating area, the audience can’t see the dancers’ feet. Here were eighty children brought in from across the country (by their schools, incidentally, not by the White House) to witness a dance performance, and only those in the first row could see what was happening below the dancers’ knees.

The final insult was the overhead lighting: three vast chandeliers. In a 1979 video of Baryshnikov performing at the White House, he looked as though he were going to crash into the chandelier over the stage. These performers feared the same fate, and you could see that. Still, it was a nice show. The White House looks pretty inside. The First Lady exuded grace: warmth and ease combined with a subtle formality. “Welcome to my home,” she said to the audience. She could be our Ambassador to the United Nations.

—Joan Acocella



Michelle Obama