

### Alvin Ailey, Sharing the Joy

December 24, 2012  
By Andrew Boynton

If you haven't seen a performance by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre in a while, you might forget just how accomplished the company's dancers are. You know they can do anything, but the visible evidence can leave you reeling. From what I saw in one of the programs in Ailey's five-week season at City Center, the company is dancing better than ever.

Starting the evening was a company première, Garth Fagan's "From Before," which he choreographed for his own company in 1978 and has never been performed by anyone else. Set to the Trinidadian composer Ralph MacDonald's percussive score, the piece is a stew of Caribbean, African, modern, and balletic dance, bubbling up through its sixteen dancers' remarkable gifts. Fagan began simply, with a man and a woman standing next to each other, facing different directions; one by one, dancers began crossing the stage, in solos made up of a single repeated phrase, often low to the ground. The cast—dressed in bright unitards, each with a multicolored band around one ankle—showed great control from the outset, their bodies tightly coiled bundles of energy.



Gradually, as the music picked up, duets and trios and larger groups developed; the dancers began to seem like music itself, each one lending tone and color to the choreography, especially in a section when the full cast did a rhythmic squatting walk, with a flicked leg in front and a contracting torso, that made the stage pulsate with bouncing behinds. As with any Ailey piece, certain moments took the breath away: a travelling phrase by Alicia Graf Mack in which, bent over, she swung a leg in a jaw-droppingly long and high arc from back to front; Yannick Lebrun's hummingbird-quick arms flashing about his head as he skittered across the stage; a stunning solo by Jamar Roberts, a big man who tempers his power with beautiful extensions and soft stillnesses. As the piece drew to a close, the dancers stood in relevé for what seemed an eternity before the lights went out, and no one faltered. Of course they didn't.

Another company première, "Strange Humors," a duet that Robert Battle, Ailey's artistic director, made for the Parsons Dance Company in 1998, followed. Kirven James Boyd and Samuel Lee Roberts, bare-chested and wearing orange pants, began moving slowly, expansively, mirroring the violin in John Mackey's score and setting up a relationship of wary respect. When the music changed to percussion, and sped up, the activity became more emotionally complex and physically virtuosic. In about eight minutes, Boyd and Roberts cycled through partnership, struggle, and cooperation, with both lightheartedness and dramatic flair—a mimed scream or laugh—and dazzling leaps and falls, the most astonishing of which occurred when the men, facing us downstage, their legs planted in a wide stance, crashed straight back, like a wall of bricks. It was a crowd-pleasing exclamation point on a succinct shout of a dance.

The evening's world première was "Another Night," by Kyle Abraham (whom I wrote about previously for Culture Desk), set to Dizzy Gillespie's classic 1942 composition "Night in Tunisia," as performed by Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers. (Abraham is proud of his Pittsburgh roots; that was Blakey's home town, too.) Dan Scully's wonderful lighting set the mood immediately: the dim, smoky stage was lit by a single source from high up at stage right—a moon that illuminated Jacqueline Green, in a blue halter top and a blue skirt. Then the music took off, with a fast drum solo, enlivened further by more percussion, followed by trumpet. We could see the dancers in the half-darkness behind a row of greenish lights set on the floor at the back of the stage; when they entered, it was as though they were making their way through foliage. Abraham's movement style is an extraordinarily watchable hybrid of classic modern, funk, and release technique, which the ten Ailey dancers (six men, four women) attacked eagerly. There's not much they can't do, and

Abraham took advantage, allowing them to show off their solid skills while giving in to the choreographer's more loose-limbed vocabulary. He challenged them, too, giving them long balances (not a problem) and phrases that went to the floor and back up quickly (less successful for some of the cast).

Abraham is a storyteller, too, and he was able to inject subtle bits of theatre—gathered downstage right, the group looked up, questioningly, amusement in their eyes; later, they crowded around Green, admiring her sexy, feline dancing. They never overplayed such passages, but, then again, Abraham is a judicious choreographer, always pulling back before something goes over the edge, leaving you wanting more. The veteran company member Hope Boykin was tremendous in “Another Night”; she is a supremely focussed dancer, with a clear, open performance style. Her joy—for this is a joyful dance—was palpable. For the most part, her compatriots matched her. Renaldo Gardner, in yellow and orange (Naoko Nagata dressed the dancers in a colorful assortment of pants, shirts, vests, and skirts), a compact dancer with a natural comedic ability, stole the show when he walked on with a bag of chips (an echo of Abraham's “Pavement”) and then launched into a terrific solo, full of charm. Abraham had him balance on one leg facing the diagonal, then do a long, slow take as he turned his head to the right and looked out at us—a completely satisfying moment.

Abraham's use of street earthiness and social dancing (a jitterbuggy motif) provided a refreshing realness, and seemed to bring out more of the relaxed personalities of the Ailey dancers themselves. We were reminded that they can do some serious dancing, but they were people, too, a group of friends who enjoyed being together and wanted to share that good feeling with us. You looked at them up there on the stage and thought, These guys are having fun. You wanted to get up there and dance with them.

The program closed with “Grace,” which Ronald K. Brown made for the company in 1999, to great acclaim. The dance seemed to exist in two states simultaneously. Its set (a towering portal at the rear of the stage, with a scrim that slid up and down, allowing dancers to enter) and costumes (handsome red and white pajama-like pants, skirts, and tops) struck an elegant tone that conflicted, perhaps intentionally, with Brown's grounded movement, based in African, Caribbean, and modern idioms. The score, too, straddled worlds, with Fela Kuti's “Shakara” and house music by Roy Davis, Jr., and Paul Johnson bookended by versions of Duke Ellington's “Come Sunday.”

“Grace” was marked by the push and pull of the heavenly (white) and the earthly (red), and the inchoate, porous border between them—a dancer in red would next appear wearing white—an indication, perhaps, of the mutability of life's possibilities in this world and beyond. Brown's movement was typically varied: an ethereal turning leap phrase that gradually slowed, becoming more earthbound, until it stopped; a little streetwise dice-rolling motion that was followed by a jaunty hop; a slow, hip-sliding walk that caressed the stage. Even in the funkier sections, though, a sombreness prevailed, which told us not so much where we were as where we were headed. The piece is called “Grace,” after all. When the dancers, now all in white, walked up through the portal, it was not a surprise. But it was still beautiful.

Each of the twelve dancers was tremendous here, no one more so than Matthew Rushing, who joined Ailey in 1992 and is now the company's rehearsal director and a guest artist. One of the prime interpreters of Ailey's work, he still commands the stage. A series of simple attitude turns toward the end of the piece stood out like the peal of a bell.

*Photograph of Alicia Graf Mack, by Andrew Eccles.*