Ailey II's Off-the-Charts Energy

By Andrew Boynton
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The members of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre are adept in what might be termed "extreme dancing"—the jumps seem trampoline-enhanced, the splits are frequently beyond a hundred and eighty degrees, and the drama is off the charts. This is what makes the company among the most successful in the world, and has contributed to its becoming a mini empire, with a theatre, a school, community programs, and a junior company. That company, known as Ailey II, is much smaller than A.A.A.D.T. (twelve members as opposed to thirty-two), and its dancers are younger, generally in their late teens and early twenties.

Ailey II was formed in 1974, sixteen years after Alvin Ailey first presented his choreography, which often incorporated themes from the African-American experience, with his small group of black modern dancers. Together, they changed the face of dance. In the intervening four decades, Ailey II has grown into a powerhouse in its own right, with critically acclaimed performances and extensive touring. The dancers possess the same jaw-dropping technique and put across the same outsized emotion as their counterparts in A.A.A.D.T., and their company challenges them by commissioning new works from emerging choreographers. In Ailey II's two-week season at the Ailey Citigroup Theatre, through April 29th, the company presents two programs comprising six works, two of them world premières.

The "Modern Moves" program features the repertory work "Echoes," by the young choreographer Thang Dao, who trained at Juilliard and at the Boston Conservatory before dancing with Stephen Petronio's troupe. Set to a string composition by Ezio Bosso, "Echoes" is a stark and haunting work that draws on Dao's memories of his early life in Vietnam but seems to be more universal, a meditation on loss, or a search for meaning. In a long, slow passage, individual dancers are gently, dreamily lifted—an ambiguous image, of drowning or of rescue. Mina Yoo's "Boulevard," a company première, puts us in another world altogether, that of urban youth. Yoo, a former Ailey II member, limns the contrasting cultures and attitudes of a neighborhood, to a background of instrumental music. The movement varies: Yoo gives us everything from the casual and gestural to the intense and virtuosic, from the humorous to the profound. "Reference Point" is a world première by the company's artistic-director designate, Troy Powell (an alumnus of Ailey II and also of the senior company). In the work's duets, solos, and group sections, set to music by Mio Morales, Powell combines ballet, jazz, and contemporary vocabularies in abstract studies of relationships, self-discovery, and community.

The company's other program, "Contemporary Choices," features "Shards," which Donald Byrd created in 1988 for A.A.A.D.T., with two works by up-and-coming choreographers. Kyle Abraham, in "The Corner," explores territory similar to that covered by Mina Yoo, but his kids are grittier, in less costumey clothing, and turn out phrases with plenty of hip-hop influences. Abraham, a former dancer with Bill T. Jones's company, has the dancers getting up and down off the floor more than they might be used to, but he also allows them to show off their classical training, and throws in movements from the ballet idiom. With music by Donny Hathaway, Chopin, and Common, it all comes together.

Another former dancer for Jones, Stefanie Batten Bland, presents the second of Ailey II's world premières, "The Legacy of Inheritance." Batten Bland, avoiding the balletic, has created a purely modern piece, in which the dancers, in underwear-like costumes, attempt to form connections with one another in a shifting series of environments, represented by an enormous white fabric. When it billows on the floor, aided by dancers at the edges, it's a cloudscape, and the dancers trying to navigate through and across it stumble and flail, seeming unsure of themselves. In the poised world of Ailey, this is a kind of, well, revelation.