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At the White House, dancers get room to move in East Room events

Michelle Obama hosts dancers at White House

The first lady welcomes members of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater and young dancers from around the nation.

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Sure enough, someone hit the chandelier.

You want to avoid it when you're dancing in the East Room of the White House, but as the many dancers who have had the distinction of leaping and spinning there can attest, it can take tricky choreography to ensure that airborne bodies don't graze the low-hanging crystal.



But it was bound to happen at the Obama administration's first dance event, held Tuesday night in honor of Judith Jamison, the longtime artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, who is retiring next year. Bound to happen because of the crackling output of the performers, regardless of the intimate space.

The hour-long affair, introduced by Michelle Obama -- and also attended by her daughters Sasha and Malia and their grandmother, Marian Robinson -- included some of the nation's most electrifying dancers. In addition to those from the Ailey troupe, there were members of the New York City Ballet, Paul Taylor Dance Company, the Washington Ballet, the b-boy group Super Cr3w and one of the

Billys (Dayton Tavares) from "Billy Elliot the Musical." With that kind of energy in the room, it was only a matter of time before the fixtures shook.

It finally happened during the "Wade in the Water" section from Ailey's churning gospel-fueled work "Revelations," when Renee Robinson, a dancer of penetrating, living power, clipped a glittering finial with the umbrella she was carrying. There was a little impromptu shower of reflected light, but no harm was done.

Anyway, the room had been rocked that afternoon, when 100 or so dance students from across the country participated in a workshop taught by some of the dancers who went on to perform Tuesday night.

"We could hear you a little bit upstairs," said Michelle Obama, addressing the young students at the evening performance, along with other assorted guests, many from the arts community. (The president was not in attendance.) The crowd laughed. "Did you all have fun this afternoon?"

"Yes!" came the shouted reply.

"Did you work up a good sweat?" Obama asked.

"Yes!"

"Well, *good*." She nodded, and slipped in a mention of her "Let's Move" fitness campaign. "So that's good -- moving, dancing, all that stuff."

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Oh, yes. Moving, dancing and all that stuff was indeed good on this night, as the art of dance was affectionately toasted and passionately executed in the first installment of what the first lady called "the new White House dance series," a chance to experience "the glory of movement."

First up was Ailey member Linda Celeste Sims, shuddering and sweeping through an excerpt from Ailey's "Cry," the piercing solo he created for Jamison in 1971 that introduced America to a new kind of dance star, not a tiny ballerina but a tall, powerful and expansive black woman who didn't dance so much as storm across the stage. That force was beyond Sims's -- or anyone's -- power to recapture, but she delivered a stirring experience nonetheless.

The male quartet from Taylor's "Cloven Kingdom" followed. Was this a bit of cheek from the 80-year-old choreographer known for his wicked sense of humor? The four men in tuxedos looked proper enough in this upscale setting -- until the drumbeats start and the men crawl around on all fours and leap at one another, carrying their hands like paws. They're wolves in fancy dress -- and oh, the delicious irony (and truth) in revealing man's unsettling animal nature amid the White House candelabra, in a consequential election cycle, in a recession, in a nation in trouble! Taylor's vision shook the room more than anything else that night.

What followed was a fast-paced panorama of the country's dance contributions. Morgann Frederick and Jonathan Jordan of the Washington Ballet performed the giddy, ultra-bright "Forget Domani" duet from Twyla Tharp's "Nine Sinatra Songs." (In grim times, Sinatra's devil-may-care urgings to forget tomorrow came across as an appealing invitation to a dangerous hangover.) The New York City Ballet's Ashley Bouder and Daniel Ulbricht whirled, bounded and banged their tambourines through George Balanchine's "Tarantella," though this piece suffered the most from its close confines. The soaring leaps needed space and distance, as did those infernal tambourines and the sugary flirtatiousness.

Super Cr3w was a compelling addition. The six young men with upper bodies of steel turned the East Room into a human skate park, as they bounced and leapt off each other's shoulders and backs, power-drilled their heads into the stage while their legs windmilled through the air and prompted some girls in the back rows to whip out their video cameras.

"The zeitgeist of today with dance on television is like nothing I've ever seen," observed an admiring Damian Woetzel, introducing Super Cr3w. Woetzel, the former New York City Ballet principal dancer, was the evening's engaging and polished emcee; he had also directed the event as a member of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities.

In an evening attended by so many young people, with its focus on the torch passing to a new generation, the singing and ballet-infused hip-hop by the young Australian Tavares, from "Billy Elliot," was especially moving. His rendition of the song "Electricity" brought Obama to her feet, followed by the rest of the crowd. Later, the excerpts from "Revelations" ("Sinner Man" and "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham," both irresistible, along with "Wade in the Water") again prompted everyone to stand and cheer.

The first lady might have enjoyed the performance most of all. In her introduction, she revealed a personal connection that she and President Obama have to Jamison. Gesturing to Jamison, who was seated in the front row, Obama described her as "an amazing, phenomenal, *fly* woman." And, she told her, "Your picture in 'Cry' was the only piece of art we had in our house."

At the end of the evening, Obama took the stage again. "Young people, keep going," she told the dance students. "If you've done it in the White House, you can do it anywhere."

Then she glanced up at the dazzling light fixture with a smile. "And they didn't break the chandelier!"