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Behind the Scenes of *Another Night*: Choreographer Kyle Abraham's Alvin Ailey Debut

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By Rebecca Bengal

On Wednesday afternoon, choreographer Kyle Abraham, finalizing his look for a curtain call, rips out the price tags from the wide-leg tuxedo pants and the white shirt emblazoned with a large blurred yellow flower he's chosen from Comme des Garçons. "I wanted to look like a Japanese artist," says Abraham, flashing a handsome smile—he's been known to perform bare-chested in a long pink tutu in his 2006 breakout work, *Inventing Pookie Jenkins*, and in plaid flannel and sneakers in this year's *Pavement*. (He's saving his Nike high-tops for later because after that evening's world premiere of his work *Another Night* for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, "I don't know where the night will take me.")



Rei Kawakubo isn't the only avant reference Abraham lets creep into the City Center. Later that evening, duos and trios of dancers, clad in a Merce Cunningham-like rainbow of color—green, orange, red, blue—flash out across the stage, a duo here, a trio here, taking flight, in lightning-fast movements punctuated by layers of thunderous drumming, Art Blakey's hard-bop improv rendition of Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia." Without warning the music downshifts into a sax solo. Jacqueline Green, sultry as that sax line in a turquoise swingy skirt slit up to there, reenters the stage with siren elegance. She's soon joined by Jamar Roberts, clad in purple, checking her out. Dancing beside her, he begins to mirror her moves; this is the "flirt," like a moment out of Cunningham's tautly structured *Duets*. They simultaneously drop into a melting half dip, each hooks one ankle behind the other leg, they share a quick, telling glance, and then they're step in step.

"I just wanted to make a fun dance," Abraham says. It might seem a departure, given the reputation he's built for creating dance narratives that freshly explore questions of identity, sexuality, race, society. His own company Abraham.In.Motion's most recent full-length work, *Pavement*, which premiered at Harlem Stage last month, reimagined the film *Boyz n the Hood*, moving it out of south central Los Angeles to the neighborhoods of Pittsburgh, where Abraham grew up, and replacing John Singleton's hip-hop sound track with Bach, Vivaldi, Mississippi Fred McDowell. Yet it would be almost impossible for the 35-year-old dancer and choreographer to finish 2012 on anything other than a high note—or rather, a high note accompanied by the explosive polyrhythms of Blakey's late-fifties recording.

The premiere of *Another Night*, which will run throughout December at Manhattan's City Center before its international tour, caps off what Abraham rightly calls "an insanely amazing year"—one in which he received the Jacob's Pillow Dance Award, a \$280,000 New York Live Arts fellowship (funding two years of salary and the production of a new work), and a \$50,000 USA Fellows prize.

"I think he's going to be a very important voice of our generation," says Robert Battle, director of Alvin Ailey. What Abraham brings to Ailey is an avant-garde aesthetic, a original and politically minded downtown sensibility that doesn't distinguish between genres but freely draws on a vocabulary that is as much Merce and Martha as it is Eadweard Muybridge and Michael Jackson. In Abraham's own words, his style is a "postmodern gumbo."

With his music choice for *Another Night*, he takes a conscious risk—the sudden tempo switches of improv jazz don't easily lend themselves to dance. But Art Blakey was a Pittsburgh native, and the nod to their shared hometown continues an important thread in Abraham's work (he began his training in the city as a teenager after seeing his first dance, the

Joffrey Ballet performing to music by Prince). “*Pavement* and *Another Night* look at the ebbs and flows of the city,” Abraham says. “*Pavement* was Pittsburgh in the nineties, all dilapidated buildings. But it has a strong arts scene that was so vibrant in the fifties, especially for jazz, and that’s part of what I wanted to reference in *Another Night*. I wanted to make something celebratory.”

Abraham also strove to tap into the Ailey dancers’ legendary athleticism and prowess, conveying both the power and the joy of Blakey’s music. “It’s an obnoxiously detailed dance,” he admits. “My question is always, can they get to the place with the material where they’re tapping into that jazz sleight of hand, where they’re moving as fast as the Tasmanian devil, yet looking calm and collected and like they’re having a good time?”

After dress rehearsal that afternoon, he and his assistant choreographers give notes. “Keep it flirty, keep it carefree,” Abraham instructs, walking among the dancers. “It’s all a conversation—stay open, acknowledge the people around you. It’s like this”—he mimes a prance across a crowded dance floor with a coy nod over one shoulder—“ ‘Oh, hey, when’d you show up?’ ‘What you doin’ tonight?’ ”

Another Night continues its run at City Center throughout December and begins a multi-city tour in January; alvinailey.org

*Photographs by Shawn Brackbill



Jacqueline Green, opening the dress rehearsal of *Another Night* at New York’s City Center.



"This is the first time I've used this much color . . . ever," the choreographer says. But he and costume designer **Naoko Nagata** agreed—the hues needed to be as bold and upbeat as the hot night the song evokes—and, this being Alvin Ailey, Abraham adds, "naturally, the clothes had to be sexy."

Photographed by Shawn Brackbill | From left: Hope Boykin, Jamar Roberts, Jacqueline Green, Aisha Mitchell, Antonio Douthit, Belen Pereyra, Renaldo Gardner



Like the dance itself, the costumes as a whole don't reference any single era or genre. "They're 'going out clothes,'" Abraham says. Because of the company's heavy touring schedule, Nagata had to revise the way she designs costumes. "I tend to use more clothes-based fabric, but for this we needed material that was very durable," she explains. "We changed the texture and tone to hold up to the physical demands of the performance."

Photographed by Shawn Brackbill | Pictured: Antonio Douthit



"I was really inspired by drums; a dream of mine would be to perform this dance with a live jazz ensemble," says Abraham, describing the score, Art Blakey's improv take on "A Night in Tunisia." "With this music, there's a real free vibe. It's a celebratory dance."

Photographed by Shawn Brackbill | From left: Kirven James Boyd, Antonio Douthit, Jamar Roberts, Renaldo Gardner



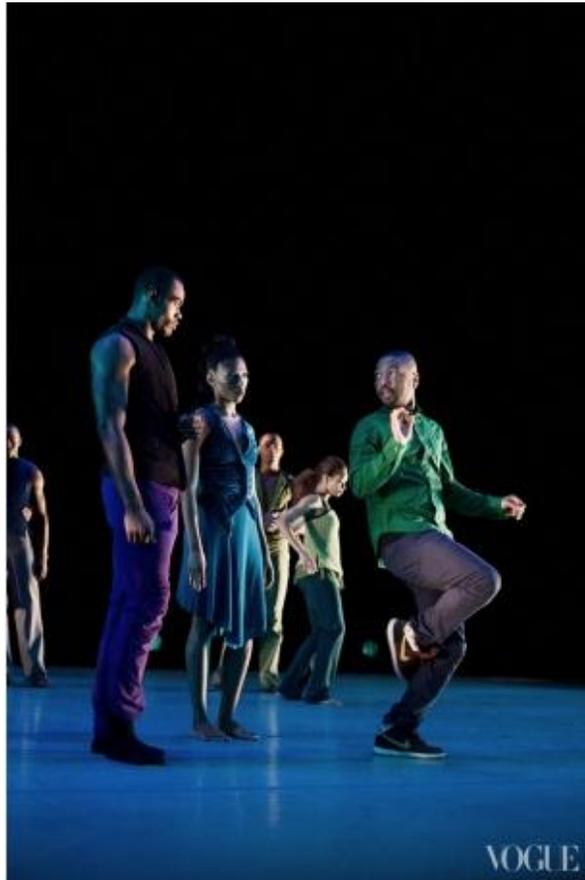
Says Abraham: "My question for the dancers is always, can they get to the place with the material where they're tapping into that jazz sleight of hand, where they're moving as fast as the Tasmanian devil, yet looking calm and collected and like they're having a good time?"

Photographed by Shawn Brackbill | The Alvin Ailey dancers



“There are moments that are lofty and balletic, but the vocabulary is also about a hodgepodge of techniques that come from social dancing,” Abraham says. In early rehearsals with the Ailey dancers, he broke the ice with Teena Marie and Brandy songs. “It’s fun to get to know people and make them loosen up a little bit and create a social atmosphere onstage.”

Photographed by Shawn Brackbill | Center: Jacqueline Green. From left: Renaldo Gardner, Samuel Lee Roberts, Aisha Mitchell



After the dress rehearsal, Abraham gives notes on “the flirt” with **Jamar Roberts** (left) and **Jacqueline Green**. “I shouldn’t be surprised but I’m still continually amazed by how hard the Ailey dancers work,” he says. “Even on a five-minute break, they’re still going over the material, asking questions.”