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CULTURE CITY | By Pia Catton

# Add Swing, Then Wing It



Improvisational jazz is not exactly a choreographer's best friend. If the musicians can change up tempos and tunes, dancers can do their best to chuck their assigned steps and wing it.

But the frisson of improvisation is an element that choreographer Kyle Abraham wanted to evoke in his new dance work "Another Night," which will have its premiere on Wednesday night with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

"There is a confidence that comes from improvisation," he said. "You have to know your stuff well enough that you can change it up. It's about conversation. Improvisation is sexy, it's unexpected."

Mr. Abraham, who is 35, was commissioned to create the work for the Ailey company by artistic director Robert Battle, who took the reins in July 2011. Mr. Battle has made a point to expand the company's repertory by inviting new faces to work with the dancers. The two agreed on an ensemble piece, and when Mr. Abraham started looking for music that would elicit a feeling of spontaneity, he was hoping to have a live drummer onstage with the dancers. First, though, he needed to begin with a recorded piece in order to generate movement. "I asked a friend for a track that sounded like Art Blakey's 'A Night in Tunisia,'" he said. "And then I just used that."

Though the recording will be the same every night, its

explosive riffs give the dance an impulsive look. In the late 1950s, Blakey, the virtuoso jazz drummer, and his band, the Jazz Messengers, recorded a wildly percussive interpretation of Dizzy Gillespie's 1942 "A Night in Tunisia." Jazz fans regard it as a work of genius for its aggressive permutations and overlays of what would otherwise be basic rhythm patterns.

"In his own inimitable, bohemian manner, Art Blakey created a tapestry of rhythms, an Afro-Cuba jazz tapestry," said Todd Barkan, a concert and record producer and the host of a new series at the Iridium jazz club. "It's so so-

phisticated."

That's exactly what appealed to Mr. Abraham: "There are some challenging moments. I wanted people to embrace that challenge of what can happen with this music. That's the edgy part."

Mr. Abraham ran through "Another Night" during a recent rehearsal with the Ailey dancers. The piece is structured as a constant flow of 10 dancers who enter and exit the stage, using Blakey's extreme rhythms in ways that only a perceptive choreographer could devise. Some dancers move only when the piano is played. Some entrances and exits are built around specific

sounds, or silence.

One recurring step has the dancers ignoring the music altogether by balancing on one foot and making a salute gesture to the floor with one hand, a movement that calms the sometimes frenetic pace. The dancer collects him or herself and then slinks off to resume movement in an individually artful way—much as a jazz musician would in an improv setting. "There is so much nuance," Mr. Abraham said. "They can hit it hard and do a shoulder shrug out of it. They're playing with it."

When he talked to the dancers, Mr. Abraham showed his gift for describing in words what he wants them to execute without words. For a curvy turn, he gave a correction that humanized the movement: "Less snake, more sneaky listening."

For two dancers who were walking off stage, he wanted more of a vignette: "We're goin' out tonight...oh yeah, lobster dinner!"

Another had to strut backward, waving to others: "I'm out. I'm gettin' drinks."

And to the group: "Look at each other. KEEP IT FLIRTY!"

To enable these kinds of human interactions, Mr. Abraham drew the curtain over the studio's mirrors, a tactic that forced the dancers to be more physically aware of their partners—and prevented them from watching themselves. "It's a group, ensemble work. It's not about the self," he said. "You need to really drive that home or else the work is flat."

"Another Night" arrives at quite a moment for Mr. Abraham, a SUNY-Purchase graduate. In June, he received the top award at Jacob's Pillow, the prestigious dance festival in Western Massachusetts. In the fall, he set up shop at New York Live Arts, the theater and performing-arts presenter in Chelsea that made him its 2012-2014 Resident Commissioned Artist. (The relatively new program gives mid-career artists a salary and time to create commissioned work.) And his recent work, "Pavement," created for his own company, Abraham.In.Motion, has earned rave reviews for its unflinching picture of gang violence and the effect of crack cocaine in neighborhoods like the ones in his native Pittsburgh.

For Ailey, Mr. Abraham has created a dance that alights on the brighter moments in social interactions. "It's still thinking about community, and urban community," he said, though without "the darkness in 'Pavement.'"

Describing his own style and approach to movement, the choreographer is no purist. He draws from the greats of modern dance (specifically Merce Cunningham) as well as social dance and hip-hop. "It's a post-modern gumbo, because of all the influences," he said. "You can taste it all but it's all one sauce."

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Above, choreographer Kyle Abraham oversees a rehearsal of 'Another Night,' a new work commissioned by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Below, two Ailey dancers work on the piece.



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