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**«DANCE**  
**Alvin Ailey company**  
**stronger than ever**  
 Under a young director, the troupe exudes a fresh energy at the Kennedy Center. **C2**

## DANCE REVIEW

# With fresh director, Alvin Ailey troupe is livelier than ever

BY SARAH KAUFMAN

Speaking to the audience just before the curtain lifted Tuesday night on the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Robert Battle, the company's director, joked about how he hadn't been born yet when Ailey performed at the Kennedy Center's opening in 1971.

"Oh, fine, just rub it in," I harumphed to myself. "You young whippersnappers can be so smug."

A few cracks later Battle, having charmed the crowd with a tale of first seeing the company when he was 12 — which was, I think, last week — the dancers took over. And they proved Battle's point, or the one I suspect he was making. Battle took charge of the troupe just a year and a half ago. New leader, fresh start: great program.

First the dancers fascinated us with their slithery resolve in one of Jiri Kylian's clever underwear ballets, "Pettite Mort." Those bodies! That control! Kylian's sexual metaphors are not subtle, but the Ailey dancers elevated the material. Their focus was on the shapes, not on preening, and they had a beautiful feel for the choreography's spiraling lines. Their unaffected self-possession lent more drama to this 1991 work than I've seen from other troupes who have assayed it, from the men's swordplay-foreplay to the peekaboo women in their frock fortresses to the unencumbered coupling that followed.

(Was that whooshing noise the fencing foils whipping around all those shirtless male torsos? Or was it a thousand sighs from the velvet seats?)

Those tricksters. There we were, all softened up and half-woozy, and the dancers sprang a full nelson on us: Ohad Naharin's "Minus 16." Naharin is a great showman and creator of spectacle, and "Minus 16" drew on it all. It was by turns a dance party to cheesy-cool lounge tunes, a sadistic ritual to Dick Dale's scampering surf-guitar rendition of "Hava Nagilah" and an audience-participation sock hop (sans socks, as this gala-night audience was in gowns and Manolos).

*Oh no they didn't!*

Oh yes they did. Dressed in identical gray suits and brimmed hats — a mash-up of Mad Men, hipsters and Hasidics — the cast of 20 men and women strode up the aisles and picked their victims. After silently leading their sequined and chiffon-draped volunteers onstage, they flung themselves into quirky pas de deux with them, nuzzling and gently yanking them around as the rest of us hooted with laughter and, perhaps, wished we were up there, too.

Finally, all the audience members were escorted offstage except for one brave, beaming white-haired woman, left to star in her own impromptu solo. She was lovely, the diva in all of us. She was also the happier echo of "Minus 16's" earlier sacrificial victim, in a scene in which the dancers rose up from their folding chairs in ecstatic waves, except for the last one in the lineup who always fell on his face.

Group dynamics are difficult to navigate, and context is everything. Naharin visits this point from several angles and serves up unexpected



PAUL KOLNIK

«PETTITE MORT»: Jiri Kylian's 1991 work is performed by Jamar Roberts and Alicia GrafMack. To see more photos of the company, go to [washingtonpost.com/style](http://washingtonpost.com/style).

heroes.

Indeed, the unexpected was the evening's chief reward. The Ailey dancers have always been superb, but the works they performed in seasons past were typically several notches down in quality. Kylian and Naharin are promising steps forward.

The program closed with "Revelations," as all of the company's programs in its six-day engagement here will. The gospel medley and audience favorite is so physically demanding, it allows little room for individual expression. This is why Renee Robinson's illuminating presence in the "Wade in the Water" section is so extraordinary. Amid all the powerful technicians around her, she consistently draws the eye with her inner excitement, the light in her eyes and her smile. After more than three decades in the company, the Washington native is retiring; Wednesday's program is her farewell to her home town.

On Tuesday she left us with a vision of joy: In the swinging party of a dance to the concluding song, "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham," no one was having more fun than Robinson.

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**ALVIN AILEY**  
**AMERICAN DANCE THEATER**  
 performs four different programs through Sunday at the Kennedy Center Opera House. The program reviewed repeats Saturday at 7:30 p.m. Tickets \$30-\$120. 202-467-4600 or visit [www.kennedy-center.org](http://www.kennedy-center.org).