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## DANCE REVIEW

# Alvin Ailey enjoying a swinging renaissance with 'Uptown'

BY SARAH KAUFMAN

"We're about to twirl your socks," Judith Jamison, artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, announced to the Kennedy Center Opera House audience on Tuesday from the stage, flashing a grin to dazzle the upper tier. "All right?"

Oh yes. Who doesn't love a little sock-twirling — even if socks were in short supply on the daintily shod toes of the glamorous crowd that included Mayor Adrian Fenty and his wife and more ball gowns than a New Year's Eve waltz.

The Ailey company has long had a strong following here, where, as Jamison reminded us with evident pride,



SWING TO IT: The Alvin Ailey troupe brings the Harlem Renaissance to life in Matthew Rushing's invigorating "Uptown." PAUL KOLNIK

# Ailey, knocking socks off

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dancers — is usually the best part of the show.

But on Tuesday, the best part of the show came after the string of high-octane excerpts that opened the program. This was a calculated greatest-hits mini-medley, with short, punchy sections of Talley Beatty's "The Stack-Up," Ailey's "Cry" and Jamison's new "Among Us (Private Spaces: Public Places)." Cheering and ovations were guaranteed and they arrived right on cue, even if some of the dancing was so out of context it was hard to know what to make of it.

No, the best part was after the intermission, when Matthew Rushing's "Uptown," a celebration of the Harlem Renaissance, gave us dancing, theater and music of substance. With it, an evening that felt unmoored and giddy found its focus.

Here's the story behind it: Rushing, one of the company's most dependable dancers, injured a calf muscle about a year and a half ago and found himself stuck at home while the company went on tour without him. A longtime jazz lover, he started poking around the music's history, which led him to research that blossoming of African American culture and arts in the 1920s and '30s. Out of this came "Uptown," a smart and stylish depiction of some of the personalities, popular dances and, especially, the invigorating energy of the era.

Rushing is in his 18th season as an Ailey dancer, and, with his injury healed, he also captivated with the liquid articulation of his shoulders in the "Wade in the Water" section of Ailey's perennial finale, "Revelations." Such is the inequity of talent distribution — and wonderfully so, in this case — that Rushing is not only a prodigiously gifted dancer but also, as "Uptown" proves, a choreographer of great promise and one to keep an eye on.

"Uptown" is the first work he has created on his own, and what's striking

about it is how fluently he creates the look and feel of the era. You can tell Rushing took a good, long soak in his source materials — with numerous visits to New York's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, I'm told — then threw the textbooks out the window and whipped up his own fun in the studio.

The energy in this piece fires and fires. A jittery "Rent Party" segment crackles with swing dancing. Rushing has a firm grasp on the phrasing of this idiom, which is a bit like double Dutch rope-jumping — the dancers catch the rhythm of it and keep that boppiness going (with the bouncy assist of Fats Waller's "This Joint Is Jumpin'") while injecting multiple breaks for aerial tricks and individual riffs.

Other sections give quick movement portraits of such luminaries as writer Zora Neale Hurston and feather-swagged divas Josephine Baker and Ethel Waters. The "Shuffle Along" section is a great little precis of an audition — the harried director as a disembodied voice of God, the starlet who goes from selling it to panic and catatonic shock, the bored has-been showgirl, cigarette dangling, teaching steps in her bathrobe — all perfectly told in a handful of minutes.

the troupe helped open the Kennedy Center in 1971. All of its performances, which continue through Sunday, are sold out (according to the center, it's Ailey's first advance sellout here in a few years).

Traditionally, its opening-night benefit gala is always about more than dancing. It's about electrifying the house, and then collecting the checks. There's nothing wrong with that; in fact, I wish more dance groups had Ailey's broad appeal and could communicate the uplifting aims of education and universal good through art as well as Ailey does. To see its magic work on a capacity crowd — and by magic, I mean the galvanizing energy of its

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Amos J. Machanic Jr. is a charismatic emcee, an elegant and irrepressible showman. His narration is heavy-handed at times: "We used our *minds*" (dramatic pause) "to elevate ourselves as people," but his bearing is all top-hat class.

"Uptown" is what so many dance companies are yearning for these days: a work that unfurls a story, with vivid characters that tell us about themselves without the help of complicated program notes but solely — and significantly — in the way they dance.

This engagement marks Jamison's 20th anniversary as Ailey's artistic director, and her last full season with the company. This fall, the troupe hopes to announce her successor, and Jamison will step down in the spring of 2011. What she leaves behind is not only a troupe that can twirl the socks right off your feet, but one that has also produced what the field needs even more than exquisite dancers: new material. It's an extraordinary legacy.

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