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## Alvin Ailey's Pandemic: Agitated. Stressed. Detached.

By: Sarah L. Kaufman

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### DANCE REVIEW

# Alvin Ailey's pandemic: Agitated. Stressed. Detached.

BY SARAH L. KAUFMAN

The covid-19 pandemic changed the creative strategies of many artists, particularly choreographers. How do you move dancers around a rehearsal studio when everyone has to stay six feet apart? The answer defines the two premieres presented by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater on the company's opening night at the Kennedy Center on Tuesday.

Though Jamar Roberts's "Holding Space" and Robert Battle's "For Four" are quite different in aim and format, they share traces of a modular construction, with dancer positions carefully calculated and held at arm's length, as if figured with a compass. The works are both characterized by agitated energy, and also a sense of physical detachment.

Roberts is the company's resident choreographer, and Battle is its artistic director. "For Four" is Battle's first work for the company since 2015. Credit both men with transcending the rigid restrictions they faced in creating these works last year. Both pieces are provocative and powerful, visually and viscerally, but it's worth noting that they contain certain

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Alvin Ailey dancers Chalvar Monteiro and Jacquelin Harris perform in Jamar Roberts's "Holding Space."

# Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, at a respectful and graceful distance

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features tied to their time, to what all of humanity was swept up in as they shaped their art. It's the look of 2021.

We don't often get a chance to take a long view of our time while living it. But the dance contours of this moment jumped out at me, especially as I watched the rest of the program. The two new works were balanced by repertory pieces that bear the markings of another distinctive time. These were "Cry" (1971) and "Revelations" (1960), iconic works created by Ailey, the founder of the company who died in 1989. They both contain the lean, stretched and boldly elongated lines of that era, and echoes of youth, vitality and freedom.

The ravishing Constance Stamatou epitomized the look with the long lines of her body and her seemingly wing-to-wing stretch in "Cry," a nearly 20-minute solo portrait of the core resilience of Black women.

Battle comes full circle as a choreographer with this program, one of four the company is presenting at the Kennedy Center. Over the course of the pandemic, the director discovered how to reconnect with what brought him to Ailey in the first place — his choreography. He spoke to me about that recently, revealing what had held him back before and how the quiet time, with no tour dates, freed him creatively.

There's a sharp, percussive attack in Battle's "For Four," as the dancers race to keep up with

Wynton Marsalis's high-energy composition "Delfeayo's Dilemma." There are four dancers, but the work is basically four solos, each with a sense of giddy release. It's so frenetic, you wonder: Is this actual happiness, or stress? Some of the dancers hit the floor. At one point, there's a quick image of an American flag, its stripes projected over a fallen body like streams of blood. Later, a sudden stillness feels ominous, intentionally forced. "For Four," just seven minutes long, ends too soon. I'd like to see Battle tackle a longer work, and develop his ideas more fully.

I had the opposite reaction to Roberts's "Holding Space," which was beautifully constructed and executed but felt a bit long. The title is a therapy term for being physically, mentally and emotionally present for another person. It resonates in a dance context: saving a spot for someone in a piece of choreography, and alluding to the rehearsal studio as a laboratory for examining feelings and sensations best put into motion rather than words.

All of these are implied in Roberts's work, which opens with a vision of churn and excitement, the dancers arrayed in rows like an army. Tim Hecker's forceful, electroacoustic soundscape adds to the feeling of being trapped in line, while Brandon Stirling Baker's lighting, like a truck stop at midnight, creates a dimensional, caged effect.

One by one, the dancers kick and twist as the others watch, and this sense of individual expression drawn out by a supportive



CHRISTOPHER DUGGAN

From left, Solomon Dumas, Samantha Figgins and Belen Indhira Pereyra in "For Four," one of the selections for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's program at the Kennedy Center.

group builds. Eventually, some step into an open cube. It's a confinement and showcase. A literal holder of space. The performers' secret anxieties are magnified.

What exactly are their troubles? Roberts's sophisticated treatment leaves that undefined, yet we know. Pandemic-related frustrations and losses — dancers have lost a great deal, from income to training to their identities as artists — racial injustice, climate disasters, corrupt politics. Take your pick. In our own lives, if at some distant point we felt the ground was firm, that's well behind us, or so it may seem. Underneath it can feel like there's only change, reversals, tumult. Yet in the world of this piece, self-exposure brings about softness. This is reflected in subtle changes in the lighting, the billowy costumes (designed by Roberts) and in the bodies.

"Revelations," which closed the program, is a good barometer for the company's overall strength. That's not surprising, perhaps — the Ailey artists are known throughout the industry for their tremendous physical shape and ability. Yet it's still inspiring, given what's come before. So was the audience on opening night, which nearly sold out the center's largest house.

[sarah.kaufman@washpost.com](mailto:sarah.kaufman@washpost.com)

**Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater** performs four programs of works at the Kennedy Center Opera House. Through Sunday. [kennedy-center.org](http://kennedy-center.org).