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Alvin Ailey adds to standard 'Revelations' at the Wang

By Jeffrey Gantz
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Now approaching its 60th anniversary, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has, since the death of its founder, in 1989, been a troupe of fine dancers in search of choreography. New York City Ballet continues to perform the considerable body of work that George Balanchine left behind; Ailey's company, now helmed by Robert Battle, has not been as fortunate. "Revelations," which premiered in 1960, is as popular as ever, and it's anchored many of the programs that the company has been bringing to Boston for nearly 50 years now. But there has to be more. Friday at the Wang Theatre, the bill was filled out with Paul Taylor's 1997 "Piazzolla Caldera," which the company initially did last year; Battle's 2015 "Awakening," the first piece he's done for the company since taking over in 2011; and Ailey's 1972 solo "Love Songs."

The setting for "Piazzolla Caldera" is a darkened bar with no furniture; the music is by Argentine tango master Astor Piazzolla and Polish tango composer Jerzy Petersburski. It begins with seven men facing off against five wom-

DANCE REVIEW

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

At: Citi Wang Theatre, Friday March 18. Remaining performances: March 20. Tickets: \$35-\$85. 800-982-2787, www.celebrityseries.org

en, a no man's land between them, scattered sorties. Couples form; the two leftover men dance with each other. In the second section, Belen Pereyra and Yannick Lebrun engage in a slinky, clingy, oddly abstract duet; eventually they're joined by lovelorn Linda Celeste Sims. The third section gives us Daniel Harder and Michael Francis McBride as a couple who are either drunk or exhausted; when a second couple, Rachael McLaren and Jamar Roberts, turns up, an intriguing four-some develops. But the finale, all swiveling hips and legs on shoulders, seems more like a tango show directed at the audience. No characters emerge; no lessons are learned; Taylor's choreography gets the white-glove treatment.

"Awakening" has more to say. It be-



PAUL KOLNIK/FILE

"Awakening," choreographed by Robert Battle, was among the pieces performed by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

gins with what sounds like elephants trumpeting in John Mackey's score and 12 dancers in white tunics and pants — they look like inmates in some institution — racing about in a state of panic. They go to ground and crawl; they huddle fearfully, looking over their shoulders. From time to time,

one man — Friday it was Roberts — leans out from the group, as if called to his destiny. As the music surges, a horizontal band of light materializes behind them, a possible escape route, but they spin and flail their arms in despair, and the opportunity is gone.

The second part reveals Roberts

spotlit and writhing on the floor while the other dancers move like an organism looking for a brain. It's clear he's been chosen, but for what? Is he a Moses figure? Jesus? Or the Chosen One from "Le sacre du printemps"? Perhaps all three — at the end of "Awakening," the dancers' imprecation rises to a hysterical pitch and Roberts crashes to the ground.

Both "Love Songs" and "Revelations" are by this point pretty much critic-proof. Matthew Rushing danced "Love Songs" Friday, and he seemed stranded between mime and floor exercise, unable to do much for the often banal lyrics of Nina Simone's "Poppies" and Donny Hathaway's "A Song for You" and "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother." In "Revelations," on the other hand, the dancers know exactly who they are, and it shows in the exuberant detail of their body language. Not only does the piece not date, it makes the spirituals of the score seem universal. If only that could be translated into the rest of the repertoire.

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