

Hope Boykin's 'r-Evolution, Dream' an Ode to Martin Luther King Jr.

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The start of "r-Evolution, Dream," a new ensemble work by veteran Alvin Ailey dancer Hope Boykin, is scored by a sole jazz drummer's symbol beat, tapped out in a vacuum of hushed, anticipatory silence.


Ailey dancer and director Matthew Rushing stands alone on stage in a white shirt and black tie, a single spotlight hitting him from the side.

Slowly, Rushing begins moving, keeping time with the beat as it begins to pick up. Other spotlights find him, and he's joined by other men, each dressed entirely in a single color—all black, all purple, all green, or all white.

The tapping of the symbol is joined by the strumming of a bass, and then a saxophone.

What begins is a visually symbolic, 1960s-themed jazz ode to Martin Luther King Jr., composed by Lincoln Center's Ali Jackson and narrated by Tony Award-winning former "Hamilton" actor Leslie Odom Jr. for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.



Ailey dancer Hope Boykin, creator of 'r-Evolution, Dream'  Andrew Eccles

The path to that stage at New York City Center began two years ago, when Boykin and a few other members of the company visited the Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta.

"There was a dedicated room that focused on Dr. King's funeral, from the perspective of those on the outside of the church," she explained. Snippets of his sermon "The Drum Major Instinct" looped on repeat, and for Boykin, an idea was born.

In the two years between that visit and the premiere of "r-Evolution" on December 9, Boykin studied King's sermons and speeches, building choreography that she said didn't change drastically from the movements she first imagined that day in Atlanta.

Back on stage, the men have been joined by women, also segregated by color, and Leslie Odom Jr.'s low voice cuts through the heavy sax and

snare drum to repeat lines like "run boy run," and "the mind's the standard of the man."

The meaning behind the ensemble's dividing color schemes isn't immediately apparent, but Boykin explained that it was explicitly intentional.

"There has always been a hierarchy in society—those who work, and those who pay others to work. The black and white groups are my working class groups, and they also define the racial differences. The green and purple groups represent money and wealth in two forms—those who have gotten it quickly, fighting and working to obtain it, and those who have always had it. Their pace is slower, moving with ease," Boykin explained.

Different premises throughout the performance allude vaguely to things like church and prison and falling in love. There's a charged standoff between Rushing and a woman and man in white—"you must be measured by your soul."

Ultimately "r-Evolution" is strongest when its full ensemble takes the stage.

In the third portion of the piece, as trumpets and a cello have been introduced and the music is roaring past its initial tentative start, the dancers pair off according to color scheme, with the exception of a man in black and a woman in white.

They flounder and chase each other, struggling to fit in among the other couples, all paired by color and mundane in comparison. Odom recites lines from Shakespeare's famous sonnet, "love is not love which alters when it alteration finds," and a frantic piano builds tension.

In contrast to the two Ailey performances that "r-Evolution" is sandwiched between, Boykin's work has a decidedly period-era restraint to it, both in its choreography and in the costumes, which are uniform except for the opposing color schemes.

"This was the best way to show how small our differences are, but also how loudly those differences speak."

Boykin later reflected, "It doesn't matter what the audience takes away, but if someone is encouraged after watching, then I have done my part. If someone taps their foot or claps their hands, then I've done my part. Even if someone decides to read something of Dr. King's because they too want to be inspired, then, again, I have done something good."

When the performance ends, it's come full circle. Rushing is again alone on stage, lit by a sole spotlight, but the hushed silence that began the show is replaced by raucous applause and a sizable standing ovation.

"r-Evolution, Dream" is Boykin's third creation for the Company, after 2005's "Acceptance in Surrender" and 2008's "Go in Grace." It will feature in performances of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at the New York City Center until the end of the year.

Wednesday marks the final performance in New York before the show goes on tour later in 2017.



Hope Boykin's r-Evolution, Dream at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York City. © Paul Kolnik