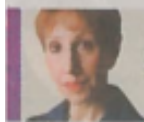


## ENTERTAINMENT

## BURNING DESIRE

Alvin Ailey dancers set stage on fire with contemporary rep



HEDY WEISS

Talk about electrifying. The arrival of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for its annual spring season at the Auditorium Theatre is invariably a reason to celebrate. But the company's opening night program on Wednesday felt more electrifying than ever as the dancers wrapped their bodies and souls around two works created for them in 2016 and now receiving their Chicago premieres (Italian choreographer Mauro Bigonzetti's enthralling "Deep" and artistic director Robert Battle's high-driving "Ella"), as well as the company's revelatory interpretation of Swedish choreographer Johan Inger's "Walking Mad," a 2001 work that entered the Ailey repertory last year.

Bigonzetti's "Deep" is a stunner, pure and simple. Set to the haunting vocals of Ibeyi — twin sisters who sing in both the Nigerian language of Yoruba and English, and are, all by themselves, a great discovery here — it is a wrenching exploration

**ALVIN AILEY  
AMERICAN  
DANCE THEATER**  
Highly recommended

**When:** Various programs, through March 26

**Where:** Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress

**Tickets:** \$33-\$125

**Info:** auditoriumtheatre.org

**Run time:** 2 hours 20 minutes, with two intermissions

of the ways in which women can be haunted and altered by lost love.

It begins with three women in sheer black tunics standing in place and moving their arms in a series of semaphore-like gestures — perhaps a suggestion of broken wings — that become a leitmotif for the work. The lyrics of the first song — "Love... if I don't feel you..." — set the tone for all that followed, with the notion that love is a powerful spell and, when broken, becomes an obsession. True, this might not be a liberating message (the lyrics to another song proclaim "There is no life without him"), but the sense of desertion and loss unquestionably serves as high-octane fuel for the fire

that burns in this stunning piece. Leading the trio of women on Wednesday was Jacquelin Harris, a petite dancer of remarkable magnetism and star power who was exquisitely partnered by Jamar Roberts, with superb dancing, as well, by Sarah Daley and Glenn Allen Sims, and Constance Stamatou and Yannick Lebrun.

In their duets — fierce yet tremendously sensual — the women often seem controlled by the men who appear more like vivid memories than actual presences even if they clearly exert a powerful force over the body and psyche of their lovers. At times, the men blindfold the women with the palms of their hands. The work, for a total of 16 dancers, uses a tight-knit chorus as both witnesses and participants. Bigonzetti's sense of pattern and design (enhanced by Carlo Cerri's superb lighting) is at once original and mesmerizing, as "Deep" probes male-female relationships with an unsettling beauty.

Inger's "Walking Mad" may be familiar to some audiences from its performances by Hubbard Street Dance Chicago. But the work, set to Ravel's "Bolero"



Jacquelin Harris in Mauro Bigonzetti's "Deep," performed by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. | PAUL VOITSE

and Arvo Part's "Fur Alina," feels totally transformed as performed by the Ailey dancers.

It is lust, far more than love, that drives the characters in Inger's decidedly mad work — a dance that sometimes moves to the point of comic absurdity, and sometimes to a state of desperation and desolation. And those emotions — played out against the all-important scenic centerpiece of a movable wall that serves as both barrier and escape hatch — are given breathtaking intensity, heat and impact by the Ailey dancers.

"Bolero," of course, is all about reaching a climax (musical and/or sexual), and here it is about people being pursued, frustrated, ignored, rejected and otherwise

propelled into a state of high anxiety by desire and appetite. The Ailey dancers (again with a searing performance by Harris, as well as stunning turns by Danica Paulos and Renaldo Maurice) clearly understand this, and they've turned the overt whimsy of "Walking Mad" into something far deeper and more consequential.

Those in search of sheer bravura hijinks will find it in Robert Battle's "Ella," in which a pair of dancers try to match the manic virtuosity of Ella Fitzgerald as heard in her mind-blowing recording of "Airmail Special," a phenomenal display of scatting and brilliant mashup of lyrics. Jacquelin Harris was back on stage, teamed with Megan Jakel, for this rip-roaring workout that ends, as

it must, in total collapse.

Every Ailey program concludes with a performance of Ailey's 1960 masterpiece, "Revelations" — that incomparable evocation of African-American spiritual life, and a work that has the audience cheering from the moment it hears the opening bars for "I Been Buked," one of the many traditional pieces of music to which it is set. I miss some of the incomparable Ailey veterans who left their highly individualistic stamp so vividly on this piece, but given the volcanic power of everything that came before, it hardly mattered.

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