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DANCE REVIEW

Passion and power mark Ailey troupe's annual Miami run

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The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is based in New York, but in Miami it's had a hometown aura since Liberty City-raised artistic director Robert Battle took the helm in 2011. The company just finished its annual

visit to the Adrienne Arsht Center on Sunday, and — with a spotlight on “Moonlight” and its Liberty City creators — this seems a good time to look at what the troupe's performances say about Battle's leadership.

(Battle wasn't shy to make the “Moonlight” connection in his customary curtain speech at

Thursday's opening night. “I had nothing to do with it but I'm gonna claim it,” he said to laughing applause. “We're from the same place.” Then, thanking his family and Miami teachers, he added “it's important to acknowledge the people and places who shape you.”)

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Jamar Roberts and Jacqueline Harris, left, with other members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, performing Mauro Bigonzetti's 'Deep' at the Adrienne Arsht Center on Thursday.

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The current roster — most of whom came on board just before or after Battle did — is dancing magnificently, their whiz-bang physical talent fired up by passionate commitment. They do everything with knife-sharp clarity, but with a burning inner life that makes the dances glow. While credit is also due the Ailey to-the-wall ethos and the rest of the artistic team, Battle is surely doing something right.

Then there's the mix of new dances. Most potent of those I saw was Kyle Abraham's "Untitled America," on Friday night. While "Untitled" deals with incarceration's effect on families, a topic with heavy political overtones, it was neither literal nor didactic. Rather, it was a powerful, poetic portrait of people overwhelmed, and torn apart internally and from each other, by oppressive forces. Designer Dan

Scully's harsh lighting illuminates a vast-seeming black stage shrouded by transparent scrims, while Sam Crawford's bleak sound score mixes crackling police radio, defeated-sounding interview snippets "I got six to 12 years," bits of spirituals and even silence. Twelve dancers crumple with arms behind them, as if handcuffed, reach yearningly upward or toward each other; they seem trapped, isolated, spiraling in perpetual longing. The agonized Ghrai Devore, intense Chalvar Monteiro and magnificent Jamar Roberts (another Miami-bred talent) stood out in an outstanding cast.

The new works on Thursday night were from European choreographers chosen to expand the company's profile. Italian Mauro Bigonzetti's "Deep" combined a haunting sense of ritual with dramatic images and often startling physical iconography, and the swirling, pulsing moves of Afro-Cuban ritual dance. (Which seemed inspired

by the music by French-Cuban twins Ibeyi, an austere soulful, Sante-ria-inflected mix of Afro-Cuban rhythms and jazzy electronica.)

Duets were fraught with tension. Roberts and Jacqueline Harris danced with hip-swirling sensuality, but he also held her with a hand across her face as a phalanx of dancers advanced toward them. Roberts was spectacular; dancing with a riveting blend of fluidity and sculptured power. In the finale, Harris seemed to hover atop a huddled mass of dancers, then on the edge of the stage, as if about to dive off a precipice.

Swedish choreographer Johan Inger's "Walking Mad" was a conceptually clever but ultimately disjointed mix. "Mad" centers on Inger's ingeniously designed wall (the dancers fold, tip, climb over and walk through it) that symbolizes barriers between couples. Renaldo Maurice mounted the stage from the audience, unsuccessfully tried to interact with

Danica Paulos, then walked through a door in the wall to a surreal world of mostly hostile relationships, set to the familiar pulse of Ravel's "Bolero." Men chased a shrieking Rachael McLaren, creepily comic. Harris (fantastic again) was a desperate figure trapped by a succession of brutal partners. Inger may mean to satirize and condemn traditional male-female dynamics, but "Mad" doesn't get past them either. The poignant ending, set to music by Arvo Part, with Maurice again vainly trying to connect with Paulos, was so different in tone that it felt like a different dance.

The company also did two deeply idiosyncratic 2008 works by Battle. The enjoyable "Ella" was performed Thursday by Harris and a dazzlingly comic Megan Jakel, who rocketed through a dizzyingly fast, loose and intricate sequence that mirrored a skittering Ella Fitzgerald jazz vocal. (A surprise appearance by Battle, shuffling across the stage behind three

Ailey dancers, had the crowd hooting with startled laughter.) Friday's "In/Side" had a similarly eccentric vocabulary, but was much darker. Samuel Lee Roberts whipped through contorted body hieroglyphs to a wrenching Nina Simone song, arching on the floor, spinning in the air, emotional agony seeming to propel his body from inside.

What stood out this visit in the performances of "Revelations," which the company does every night on tour, was how well the company keeps founder Alvin Ailey's soulful masterpiece simultaneously pristine and profoundly alive. The dancers seem to sculpt every section into the air, but they also glow with intention. In the exuberant "Move, Members, Move" finale, each man and woman seems moved by a different inner narrative and individual joy. "Revelations" has become a kind of performance ritual, one that the Ailey company keeps richly meaningful.