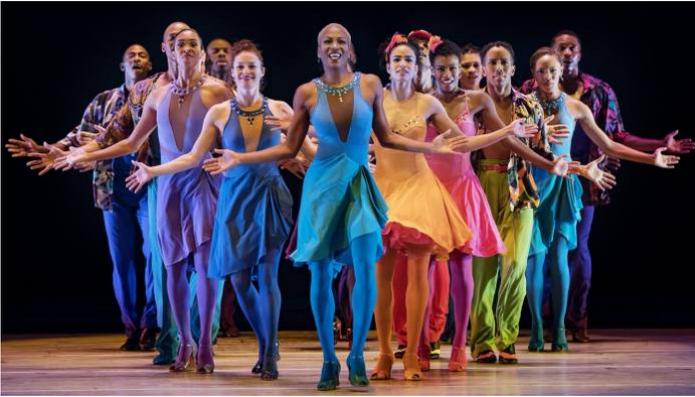


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Alvin Ailey brings its perfectly calibrated dance to Paris

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The American troupe opened a three-week season with an eclectic programme.

Paris isn't lacking for new music venues. After the Philharmonie, another major construction project was completed in April: La Seine Musicale, in the southwestern suburb of Boulogne. Designed by Shigeru Ban and Jean de Gastines, it occupies a third of the tiny Seguin Island on the Seine, hugging its shoreline; the flagship auditorium sits on one end like an oversized Fabergé egg, with rotating solar panels curving over it.

La Seine Musicale also boasts a less showy multi-purpose stage fit for large productions: this month it hosts its first dance performances, courtesy of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. This is the company's fifth Paris visit since 2006 as part of the Etés de la Danse festival, and its popularity ensured a full house for the opening programmes.

Still, with 2,400 seats to fill (though the capacity can stretch to 6,000 for concerts) and fairly poor sightlines, La Seine Musicale won't be an easy sell for other dance companies.

Ailey has brought five mixed bills for this three-week season, and the first one was perfectly calibrated. It began with *The Winter in Lisbon*, one of the last works made by the dancer and choreographer Billy Wilson before he died in 1994. Wilson, for whom Serge Lifar created an *Othello* ballet, isn't well known in Europe, and it proved a welcome introduction.

The Winter in Lisbon is a well-crafted tribute to the jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie. It's full of Broadway quirks — heels for the women, kicks, some jazz hands — but Wilson lends them a swaying quality that latches on to Gillespie's witty swing, and, at times, its melancholy undertones.

The heels were back for Paul Taylor's *Piazzolla Caldera*, from 1997. It starts conventionally enough for a tango-inspired work, with men and women sizing each other up. But Taylor sets himself a challenge that subverts the familiar idiom: with more men on stage, some intriguing same-sex partnerships emerge.

In one scene, two men turn the push-and-pull of tango into an expression of frustration, alternately letting each other fall, their tense partnering contrasting with the seamless turns of other couples. Elsewhere, a lone woman embodies unfulfilled desire. The gender dynamics aren't always subtle, but they add a layer of complexity to tango's glossy surface.

The short, humorous duet *Ella*, created by Ailey director Robert Battle, was followed by the company's signature hit, Alvin Ailey's 1960 *Revelations*. It's always a piece to which the dancers give their all, though on this occasion Akua Noni Parker's "Fix Me, Jesus", soulful and near-perfect, was the stand-out.