

# FINANCIAL TIMES

## The nightmarish and the exhilarating meet in Rennie Harris's 'Lazarus'

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A powerful take on African-American history performed at New York's City Center

In *Lazarus* — the stunning finale to Rennie Harris's dark trilogy for the Ailey company — a cluster of dancers sways on their toes, heads cocked as if their necks had been broken by hanging. Others roll forward like corpses carried away on the tide. In a recurring motif that evokes the Pietà, one person gently drags another, collapsed in his arms, across the stage. This is the "strange fruit" of African-American history. When the dancers pray, they shake their clasped hands like gamblers desperate for a lucky roll.

Ailey repertory may regularly tell it like it is — or like it has been — but the dances usually signal early on that relief is on the way. Though the one-hour *Lazarus* finds salvation after intermission, its first astringent act dwells in a living hell with no hint of exit. The dance's structure is still more atypical for the troupe. Gorgeously unhurried, the 15-person piece proceeds according to the intuitive logic of a nightmare — in isolated shards untethered to dramatic imperative. This auspiciously bold premiere for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's 60th anniversary doesn't even have a consistent beat to hold it together — a common enough lack in postmodern dance but not at this musically driven company.

Darrin Ross's soundscape serves more as setting than music. Consumptive breathing and a heartbeat's insistent thump sets *Lazarus* inside the poor man's ailing body. The snatches of field and praise songs, contemporary a cappella folk and unctuous spoken word emphasise the wind tunnel of the throat and the friction of tongue against teeth and lips. We must be in the belly. Lighting designer James Clotfelter forgoes the look of natural light for the ominous beam of a police patrol.

Only when Ross lays down a beat does the 54-year-old Harris's idiom come into play. Hip-hop, ie culture, turns out to be the way out of the belly of tragic history. When Harris succumbs to Ailey uplift, it is in typical Ailey fashion: redemption is dancing, specifically with others.

From his vast knowledge of hip-hop and its precursors, the Philadelphia native has chosen for *Lazarus's* foundation a restless, speedy rhythm-house: wending, grapevine steps, rolling cha-cha hips, jitterbugging feet, and lower legs flung forward as in Irish step-dancing. For Ailey's extraordinary troupers, he has fashioned a maze of vintage steps more exhilaratingly complex than anything you'll find on YouTube or on the streets. The audience goes crazy — finally something to whoop and whistle over.

Yet look closely and you will see in the infectious moves traces of the agonising early steps. Speaking in code, they divulge why, once risen, every Lazarus must keep moving — or grooving.

★★★★☆