

FINANCIAL TIMES

Premieres at Ailey, City Center, New York – steps in the right direction

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This season's luminous *The Call* marks Ronald K. Brown's seventh work for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 20 years — more than any other choreographer. But why not twice that? The 52-year-old Brooklyn native regularly pays homage to the company's founder, yet it is his own eloquent, open-hearted west African-inflected idiom that has become the troupe's lingua franca.

As everyone, including the choreographer, has noted, his dances typically map a spiritual journey. The intimate *Call* makes clear that, whatever the work's schema, the spirit abides in the steps.

The five-person dance opens to the slow movement of Bach's sixth trio sonata, arranged for cello, bass and pizzicato mandolin. It ends, also at a walking pace, with a Malian song to the plucked strings of the kora. So the end is in the beginning and enlightenment is roundabout. In between start and finish, a social dance unfolds — the trademark Ailey gesture of solidarity with the audience. Salvation according to Brown is not baptism by fire but the fruit of emanating warmth and welcome, which is already its own reward.

Diffusing rather than coming to a full stop, *The Call*'s steps seem to trail light. The ribcage churns in counterpoint to the sensual figure-eights of the hips, which in turn drive the gentle back-and-forth folk patter of the feet. One arm stretches to the side with palm facing us as if inviting a hug, or the arm caresses the air as if calming the waters, or traces the first stroke in the sign of the cross, from forehead to belly. The radiant dancers neither muffle nor shout the steps: they trust we will receive them.

Alongside Brown's singular contributions, much of the older repertory this season seems beside the point. It doesn't help that Robert Battle, now in his seventh year as artistic director, has proven too indiscriminate in his choice of revivals. Alvin Ailey's mawkish 1972 solo *Love Songs*, for example, never should have been taken out of mothballs. And there is no justification for Battle stuffing the calendar with his own and his predecessor Judith Jamison's minor works. On the other hand, he has a keen eye for contemporary choreographers who suit the company, however outside the Ailey mould they may seem, such as the cerebral, spiky Briton Wayne McGregor.

Commissioned by the Zurich Ballet, his *Kairos* is already less clinical and strident than his norm; with Ailey the 2014 work enters a pastoral and elegiac realm. If splayed ribs count as risqué for ballet dancers, for these troupers the soul rides up and down the spine, flexed or not. For this second foray into McGregor, they treat the movement as tenderly as they do each other. It gains in depth and complication.

★★★★☆

To December 30, nycitycenter.org; alvinailey.org