

DANCE REVIEW

'Ode' feels like another revelation for Ailey

BY SARAH L. KAUFMAN

In his customary remarks to the audience at the Kennedy Center Opera House, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Artistic Director Robert Battle added some cheek.

"It's great to be here at the Kennedy Center," he said Tuesday, "where you're allowed" — he leaned into the microphone — "to testify."

The audience chuckled and applauded. No one could miss the dig at the contentious impeachment trial of the man who was to deliver his State of the Union address the same night.

"Enough of politics," Battle continued, his hand waving away the subject.

But the sentiment remained in the air. How could it not? Increasingly, issues ripped from the headlines and our national debates — including race, violence and brutal episodes from history — have come to the fore in the works Battle commissions. Consider Tuesday's local premiere of "Ode," a skillful and delicate treatment of gun violence and its disproportionate claim on black men.

"Ode" is by Jamar Roberts, recently named the troupe's first resident choreographer. He's also a standout dancer in the company whose appealingly soft physicality masked his strength in "A Case

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of You," a romantic duet with the equally effortless Jacqueline Green that both dancers whirled through beautifully, elevating choreographer Judith Jamison's overly sugary concept.

What's most interesting about Roberts as a choreographer is his embrace of softness, which extends to his use of music as shading that slightly lags or leads the dancers' moves. "Ode" was accompanied by a recording of jazz pianist Don Pullen's "Suite (Sweet) Malcolm, (Part 1 Memories and Gunshots)," by turns introspective and unsettling. Six men gather before a striking black backdrop scattered with flowers that glow brighter as the tableau beneath them grows more grim. There are no gunshots, no police, no struggle except inner turmoil, erupting now and again, sending the men's arms heavenward, their torsos twisting.

There are images of unity and loss. The men lock arms but still one dancer slides to his knees. A soloist stands apart, his body crumpling in what comes across as a spiritual disintegration. They all join up again but still one falls, and you feel your heart drop to the floor with him.

Battle is smart to give Roberts a platform to develop. There's more to come from him, and soon: New York City Ballet will perform a new work by Roberts in May.

The program opened with an excerpt from Darrell Grand Moultrie's "Ounce of Faith," striking a celebratory tone, with the statuesque and lyrical Khalia Campbell leading a cast in Technicolor



PAUL KOLNIK/KENNEDY CENTER

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs "Ode," by Jamar Roberts, its first resident choreographer and a dancer with the troupe.

costumes that, along with the jazz score, brought to mind old-school movie musicals.

Yet "Ode" was the evening's burning core. It is only the latest

in a series of sharp views of social issues. Other programs during the company's engagement here, which concludes Sunday, will feature Donald Byrd's new "Green-

wood," inspired by the 1921 race riot in Tulsa, that left hundreds of black residents dead and destroyed a thriving community.

These follow on last year's "La-

zarus," by hip-hop choreographer Rennie Harris, whose story of resilience immersed audiences in the bloody history of lynchings and violated bodies. And there

have been others. I don't mean to imply that all of Ailey's new acquisitions are political; they aren't. But works such as "Ode" constitute a powerful new direction for the company.

The Ailey troupe has survived for more than 60 years not only on the peerless excellence of its dancers but also on the feel-good nature of its programs, dominated by works that ignite rapturous responses and rouse the public to its feet out of sheer joy. Works in the mode of "Revelations," the perennial gospel-inspired closer. On Tuesday, six self-possessed local dance students chosen by former Ailey star Renee Robinson swept onstage with gusto in the "Processional" section, adding extra electricity to an especially strong rendition.

Joy is welcome, necessary and grand. Yet, over the years, a preponderance of the lighthearted premieres have also been lightweight. Battle is restoring the balance by adding much-needed gravitas.

The Ailey company has always told stories about the black experience — Ailey founded it as a vehicle for that — but now the subject matter, imagery and idiom are sharper, more affecting and memorable. Ailey is doing what few major dance organizations do: It is keeping pace with the times, and the conversation.

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Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs several repertory programs, all including "Revelations," through Sunday at the Kennedy Center Opera House. \$49-\$199. 202-467-4600. kennedy-center.org.