

Two takes on topic of race hit two stages

By: Cynthia Perry

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AJC PREVIEW
BEHIND THE SCENES OF
'HEART/BEAT' AND
ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN
DANCE THEATER



Artists of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater perform Donald Byrd's "Greenwood," slated for its Atlanta debut.

CONTRIBUTED BY PAUL KOLNIK

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'Greenwood,' 'Sunrise Divine' coincide with Black History Month.

By Cynthia Perry
For the AJC

Two major dance companies take very different approaches to the topic of race in productions debuting on Atlanta stages this month.

In preparation, a diverse group of dancers gathered in an Atlanta Ballet studio last month as a recorded choir sang, "Hal-le-lu-jah" — each syllable a crisp note skipping down a harmonious scale. The music grew louder and faster as several men carried dancer Jessica Assef along a diagonal path, her form an arabesque with one pointe gliding boldly along the floor. With a surge in the score, they vaulted her overhead as she reached a lithe leg to the rafters. Others emerged from the gathering throng, one exultant lift bursting out of another to a driving gospel beat.

They were rehearsing "Sunrise Divine," a jubilant new work by

Works touch different aspects of black culture

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Dwight Rhoden in collaboration with composer Kevin Johnson, set for its world premiere Feb. 7-15 as part of "Heart/Beat: Gospel, Erubeck and Rhythms of the City" at Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre. Rhoden's work infuses a dancer's artistry and athleticism with a sense of spirituality born of African American culture, and the mix is exhilarating.

Meanwhile, during a recent rehearsal at The Alley Studios in New York, a white woman and a black man stood side by side facing opposite directions in a confined space. She took his hand, pulled away in taut counterbalance, then snapped like a rubber band to his other side, one leg sweeping open as she turned away from him. He took her outstretched arms from behind as she bowed forward, one leg raised like a cobra's hood poised above their tense, backward embrace.

The duet depicts an imagined encounter that could have sparked the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre — considered one of the worst episodes of racial violence in U.S. history. It's the subject of Donald Byrd's "Greenwood," a new contemporary ballet slated for its Atlanta debut during the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Feb. 20-23 run at the Fox Theatre.

Rhoden's and Byrd's works address different aspects of African American culture and history, and they take different tones, rightfully so. "Greenwood" is filled with rage and sorrow as it breathes life into a historical account of racial violence. "Sunrise Divine" conveys joy and hope as it revels in spirituality and unity. In the end, though, the two pieces share more in common than might appear on the surface.

Byrd, a Tony Award-nominated choreographer and a pioneer in contemporary ballet, has built a reputation with contemporary dance works that explore complex societal issues. In recent years, he has turned his sights on the Jim Crow era of the South: stories of racially motivated violence that were all but buried by the institutions built to uphold justice and the law. He believes it's the artist's role to bring dark aspects of American history to light so we can begin talking about reconciliation.

He first heard about the Tulsa Race Massacre when his company was on tour in Tulsa, Oklahoma, about seven years ago. Last year, while Byrd was creating "Strange Fruit," a work about lynching, the incident came to mind. Around that same time, Ailey artistic director Robert Battle approached Byrd about creating a new work. The time to



Choreographer Dwight Rhoden (left foreground) rehearses with Atlanta Ballet dancers Airi Igarashi and Keaton Leier for the upcoming world premiere of "Sunrise Divine." It's a departure for Atlanta Ballet, which hasn't commissioned many works set to African American music. PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED BY KIM KENNEY / ATLANTA BALLET

explore the events that occurred in the prosperous black community of Greenwood seemed right.

In 1921, racial tensions were about to snap in oil-boom Tulsa. The segregated African American community around Greenwood Avenue had become a nationally recognized business district dubbed Black Wall Street. Many whites resented Greenwood's prosperity, which undermined the false assumptions on which Jim Crow laws were based.

The details of what transpired between Sarah Page, a white teenage elevator operator, and Dick Rowland, a young black shoeshiner, are unclear. Some believe Rowland tripped and stepped on Page's toe. Others say the two were romantically intimate. Still others think Rowland assaulted Page. Whatever occurred, it prompted Page to scream, which set off a chain reaction that resulted in a white-led rampage of looting, arson and murder throughout the Greenwood district. Within 48 hours, Greenwood was burned to the ground, an estimated 300 people were dead and 10,000 people were homeless.

In his interpretation of events, Byrd uses a nonlinear narrative that moves back and forth in time. He shows all three versions of what might have happened between Page and Rowland, but the characters are slightly abstracted, their emotions amplified to render them universal. An ensemble of silver-clad figures representing the "white psyche" embodies envy, hatred and a collective impulse to destroy the black neighborhood. An African American family symbolizes the attacked community. The audience sees the incident through the eyes of a female persona Byrd carries over from his



Atlanta Ballet dancers Sujin Han and Moises Martin rehearse recently for Dwight Rhoden's upcoming world premiere of "Sunrise Divine."

production of "Strange Fruit."

Field recordings of African American religious songs "My Soul Is a Witness" and "Move Members Move" combine with newly composed music by Emmanuel Witzthum and Craig Tattersall to underscore the drama on stage.

The piece premiered in front of a stunned audience last December at the New York City Center. It's hard to predict how Atlantans will respond, but when Byrd spoke about it on a panel last month at the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, the expressions on the faces of African Americans in the audience conveyed pain and outrage, while white audience members displayed extreme discomfort.

While "Greenwood" doesn't offer much in terms of how to deal with the collective memories it draws on, Byrd hopes

to evoke a sense of compassion and understanding. "To move forward," he said, "we have to acknowledge the past."

It's no coincidence both productions debut during Black History Month, but it bears noting that the Alvin Ailey company, which is steeped in African American culture, chose to explore a painful piece of buried history, while Atlanta Ballet, a company that has only three African American dancers on its roster, sought to celebrate unity and the universality of gospel music in its premiere of "Sunrise Divine."

Rhoden, the choreographer for "Sunrise Divine," is a former member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater who co-founded the New York-based Complexions Contemporary Ballet, built on a philosophy of diversity and multiculturalism.

He created the new ballet in collaboration with Kevin Johnson, composer and director of the Spelman College Glee Club, which will perform alongside the Golden Gate Singers and soloists including Lydia Pace.

The production came out of Atlanta Ballet's initiative to attract new audiences, collaborate with Atlanta-based artists and commission work by choreographers of color, said Gennadi Nedvigin, artistic director of Atlanta Ballet. Rhoden also has the international profile Nedvigin sought and a style that builds on Atlanta Ballet dancers' classical base and stretches their artistry.

The idea of collaborating with a gospel composer appealed to Rhoden, partly because he simply loves the music, and he'd frequently danced to gospel music as a member of the Ailey company.

Johnson compiled a score of

new and traditional pieces that span the evolution of gospel music and complement Rhoden's vision of bringing people together in hope, faith, love and unity. The piece starts and ends with original compositions, moves to jubilee music, then on to spirituals such as "Deep River" and "Steal Away." Out of those quiet moments, the sound builds to Walter Hawkins' "When the Battle Is Over" and finally bursts into "Hallelujah."

Rather than interpret the song lyrics literally, Rhoden let the music's rhythmic undercurrents drive movement that expresses qualities of faith, strength, tenacity and the ability to reinvent oneself — all aspects of the African American spirit, Rhoden said. But the universal message is love.

"Sunrise Divine" is a departure for Atlanta Ballet, which hasn't commissioned many works set to African American music. Lauri Stallings' 2008 "Big" with Big Boi Patten and Geoffrey Holder's 2003 "Transcendence" with Atlanta's New Birth Missionary Baptist Church Choir are exceptions. Conveying essences of black culture through dancers who are mostly white, Asian or Hispanic and are trained in a European aesthetic proved challenging for the company. Interpreting gospel music came easily to the black dancers in the production, Rhoden said, but the majority of dancers had a long way to go.

"My job was take who and what they are and merge it with who and what I am," Rhoden said. "It was about trying to find that place in the middle where we can all meet and have this experience."

The work begins with an affirmation of faith and ends in celebration. Asked to identify the tension in the piece, Rhoden said it's "in the movement and grit in the spirituals. By the time we reach 'Steal Away,' we have shown that sense that there is struggle sometimes, but where there is struggle, there is strength."

Ultimately, the message of "Sunrise Divine" is celebration. "I think we're always going to battle with our demons in finding a way to understand one another when we're different," Rhoden said. "When it's all said and done, we're all fighting for the same thing, which is love and understanding."

While "Greenwood" and "Sunrise Divine" take very different paths through history, both works aim to inspire compassion and understanding while speaking to the power and resilience of African Americans. As with Ailey's "Revelations," and the sacred music common to all of these dances, the artists aim for that special alchemy that transforms painful experiences into universally relevant works of lasting beauty.