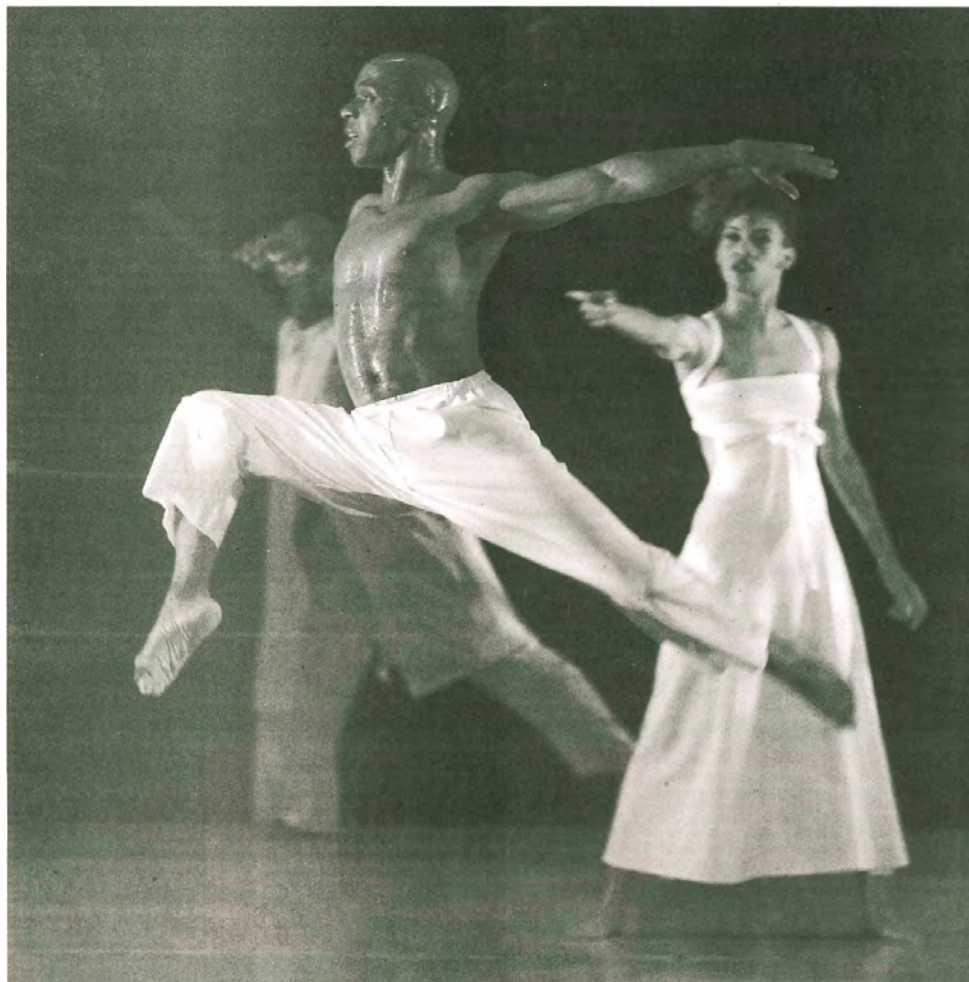


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ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Matthew Rushing, foreground, in "Grace" (1999), a Ronald K. Brown work that features many styles, at City Center on Tuesday.

## A Tribute Evening, but With No Goodbye at the End

"Sometimes we like to celebrate people while they are still agile," said Robert Battle, the artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, at City Center on Tuesday. He was explaining

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DANCE REVIEW

that although the evening's program celebrating the dancer Matthew Rushing was the kind of event usually given to a retiring artist, Mr. Rushing is not retiring yet. Mr. Battle's eulogistic speech was the second of the evening. The first came from Judith Jamison, the company's former artistic director, who hired Mr. Rushing in 1992. She recalled first encountering him a few years before that on a trip to Southern California: a 15- or 16-year-old of "prodigious talents and an equal proportion of humility." This was a young man who "had it," the "it" being not just amazing technique but also honesty and spiritual fervor. She called him "an embodiment of the best possible in each of us."

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs through Jan. 5 at City Center, 131 West 55th Street, Manhattan; 212-581-1212, nycitycenter.org.

It's Ailey company style to be very free with hyperbolic self-congratulation. Yet in Mr. Rushing's case, it's all justified, as his performances on Tuesday once again demonstrated.

The show opened with Ronald K. Brown's luminous "Grace" (1999), an interesting choice in that it doesn't have a starring male role. (The guiding spirit is a woman, danced here by Linda Celeste Sims with her usual fierce brilliance.) Though Mr. Rushing did have a brief luscious solo, he spent most of the dance in a pair or as part of the group. This fit with his humility, but seeing him next to other dancers doing the same steps brought out how his version almost always seems the ideal one, the way it's supposed to look.

Mr. Rushing doesn't show off or intentionally draw focus, yet even when he isn't out front or the man being honored, your eye goes to him and stays. Every shape is exact, and rarer, the energy between shapes never stagnates. It keeps flowing, changing. He pays as much attention to transitional steps as to the flashy maneuvers. He makes it all look easy, yet his cool is never arrogant or blasé.

"Grace," with its suite of recordings shifting between a slow jazz spiritual, Afropop and house beats, showed the sensitivity of Mr. Rushing's musicality. The rest of the program expanded the point, exhibiting that responsiveness in hand with his versatility.

Some Ailey dancers look uncomfort-

### *The Ailey celebrates Matthew Rushing in a showcase program.*

able doing club dance in Rennie Harris's "Home" (2011) or have trouble with its quick footwork. Not Mr. Rushing. Walking in a wide circle, he was so smooth he might have been riding a bicycle. His chameleonlike ability to inhabit new styles is one reason among many that outside choreographers tend to cast him first.

In Ailey's "Pas de Duke" (1976), the

versatility is virtuosic, switch-hitting between ballet and jazz, Ellingtonian elegance and lowdown sass. It's a friendly competition, and in dancing it with Ms. Sims, Mr. Rushing put the emphasis on friendly. In the "Song for You" solo from Ailey's "Love Songs" (1972), he established his modern-dance control over sobbing contractions and aching balances. The line between falseness and sincerity in the Ailey repertory can be thin, but I have never seen falseness in Mr. Rushing.

The heart of that repertory is Ailey's "Revelations" (1960), the work that every Ailey dancer performs the most. One way of judging an Ailey dancer is by what he or she does to it.

A surprise on Tuesday was an appearance by the great Renee Robinson, who retired after her own tribute evening last December. But there was no surprise in how Mr. Rushing conjured a river with his rippling body or how his chuckling shoulders made the church service at the end an occasion of joy. His dancing could make a believer out of anyone.