

DECEMBER 4, 2013

Proving That Ailey Never Stands Still

By SIOBHAN BURKE

On a recent afternoon, 10 dancers from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater caught their breath after a run-through of “Chroma,” an exceptionally fast-paced, convoluted work by the British choreographer Wayne McGregor. The windows of the fifth-floor studio offered sweeping views of Midtown Manhattan, but the city looked almost sleepy next to the dancing that had just happened.

Mr. McGregor, who resembles a walking exclamation point — tall, gangly, animated — seemed pleased with this latest incarnation of the piece. (He first created “Chroma” in 2006 for the Royal Ballet in London, where he is the resident choreographer.)

On Wednesday, the troupe opens its five-week City Center season with its signature work, Ailey’s 1960 “Revelations” — that soulful staple of the modern-dance canon — and the company premiere of “Chroma,” with its much starker, more futuristic sensibility.

Continued on Page 2



ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Wayne McGregor, far left, in “Chroma” rehearsals with Alvin Ailey troupe members.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

“There’s something about the dancers, a kind of raw physicality, that you don’t get in many places around the world.”

WAYNE MCGREGOR, choreographer.

Proving That the Ailey Ethos Never Stands Still

From First Arts Page

"Chroma" represents the artistic director Robert Battle's latest effort to broaden the Ailey repertory.

Under his direction, the company has performed, for the first time, pieces by Paul Taylor, Jiri Kylian and Kyle Abraham. This season, Mr. McGregor and the Canadian choreographer Aszure Barton join that list.

In his third season at the helm of the Ailey enterprise, one of the country's most popular and widely touring modern-dance groups, Mr. Battle, 41, is still a rookie, considering that he is only the third artistic director in the troupe's 55-year history. Leaders

here stick around for a while; traditions run deep.

Mr. Battle faces a classic conundrum: how to honor his pioneering predecessors, who broke ground for black artists in modern dance and built the company's global presence, while keeping the repertory relevant and fresh, for both the audience and the dancers.

Some dancegoers are eager for more change. The New York Times's chief dance critic, Alastair Macaulay, wrote last year that the troupe often looks "derivative, audience pleasing, incidentally sexy, showy, obviously possessed of gifts and promise, only some of which it wants to fulfill."

He continued, "This has long been the most predictable company in American dance."

Speaking in his office at the six-story Ailey headquarters, Mr. Battle said: "We don't want to become a museum. But at the same time, we don't want to fall into the trendy thing."

"The kind of work that we generally dance has an emotional content," he said, citing "Revelations," with its rousing gospel music, as an example. Given that history "of dancing about something," he wondered, what would it mean to tackle a harsher, more abstract piece like "Chroma," which he describes as "an assault of gesture and angles and legs and extremities"?

"How would the work deepen and how would it change?" Mr. Battle continued. "So that we're not just doing what's been done, but seeing what we can bring to it?"

Mr. McGregor, 43, had similar questions. He has staged "Chroma" for a host of prestigious ballet companies but never, until now, a modern-dance troupe. After working with classically trained dancers, Mr. McGregor was drawn to the Ailey company's "different range of physical histories," he said. "There's something about the dancers, a kind of raw physicality, that you don't get in many places around the world."

"What's perhaps lost from a balletic point of view is gained from a contemporary point of view," he added. "So the use of weight might be different, where the center rests, how the legs fire in a particular way. That changes the way you look, and therefore the emphasis of the piece is different. I think that's what is exciting about restaging it here."

In addition to Mr. McGregor's pliant, hyperkinetic, deliberately strenuous movement, "Chroma" features John Pawson's minimalist set — towering white walls that surround the stage on three sides — and a brassy orchestral score by Joby Talbot and Jack White III of the White Stripes.

During a recent rehearsal, there was still work to be done. "I think the whole thing should be rougher," Mr. McGregor told the Ailey dancers, puncturing his feedback with sudden scrawls of movement. While the choreography called for calculated precision, the audience, he explained, "should feel like you're doing it for the first time." He consulted with individuals or pairs — "Chroma" is chock-full of preening solos and precarious partnering — giving others a moment to rehydrate and shed layers of sweat-soaked clothing.

Mr. McGregor said that, for visual reasons, he was interested in working with a predominantly African-American group like Ailey. The companies that have danced "Chroma," like most ballet troupes, are by and large fair-



Alicia Graf Mack and Vernard J. Gilmore rehearsing "Chroma."

skinned, he said. In some ways, "Chroma" is an exploration of color; Mr. McGregor defines the title as "a freedom from white." Originally, he said, he aimed to expose "subtle differences in whiteness" against the bright white backdrop of the set, with costumes that "take skin tone and slightly heighten it."

But he was curious: "What would it look like with black dancers in that white space? How might that actually change the temperature of the way in which the choreography is related and communicated to an audience? I thought that would be a really interesting tension to create."

Other tensions arose from his unorthodox casting. Alicia Graf Mack, one of the company's leggiest virtuosos, at 5 feet 10 inches, was surprised to learn that Vernard J. Gilmore, who is an inch shorter, would be her partner. "I

was like, 'What's happening?'" Ms. Mack recalled. "I felt so huge with him."

But, from the first rehearsal, she was encouraged "to be larger than life," she said. "That's helped me in general, with my understanding of myself and my body — the idea that it's O.K. to be this huge, tall, amazing tree of a person."

That's the kind of growth that Mr. Battle is hoping for, amid potentially tiresome matters of past, present and future. "I want to give these dancers a challenge that's like some really good food to eat, you know?"

"I'm looking at these marvelous artists," he added, "and wanting them to have every opportunity to express their excellence. If I use that as my guide, that's what's going to really drive the company forward."