

The Star-Ledger

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has an edgy British import, amid this season's novelties

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Five years ago, when the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company was performing in London, one dancer snuck away to see the sights. He didn't head for Westminster Abbey or line up to gawk at the crown jewels. No, each morning for a week, this young man attended a workshop with British choreographer Wayne McGregor before putting in a full day of rehearsals with Ailey.

"I was fascinated by his choreography and the way he dissected movement," says Antonio Douthit, who had seen McGregor's edgy choreography on YouTube and relished the opportunity to explore a new way of moving. Douthit never dreamed he would perform McGregor's work onstage. Yet McGregor's "Chroma," originally created for Britain's Royal Ballet, is among the surprises that Ailey artistic director Robert Battle has planned for this season. It will be on the gala program when the Ailey opens at New York City Center on Wednesday.



Alicia Graf Mack and Vernard J. Gilmore of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 'Chroma'

Paul Kolnik

The season's other novelties include the premiere of "LIFT," choreographed by Aszure Barton, and Bill T. Jones' lyrical "D-Man in the Waters," while Ronald K. Brown's "Four Corners," new in June, will be reprised. Fresh productions of Alvin Ailey's "Pas de Duke" and "The River" are also planned.

"Chroma" promises to be especially striking, however, relying on a visual concept in which the dancers' skin tones contrast with a minimalistic white set designed by John Pawson. Entrances and exits take place through a mysterious aperture upstage. McGregor says he originally imagined "an architectural space where bodies would behave architecturally." Setting out from there, he and Pawson arrived at an "empty" place where "the body would provide the color."

What fascinates the dancers is the movement. "While it's very leggy, the torso also has to move and the way it moves is in circles and spirals," says Alicia Graf Mack, who dances an adagio—the only slow section in a piece filled with rapid-fire partnering set to music by Joby Talbot and the White Stripes.

"It requires you to be lifted, and very upright in places, and then very grounded and able to use your deepest plié," she says.

Douthit adds, describing the duet he dances with Linda Celeste Sims: "She has to manipulate herself while you're trying to lift her." McGregor doesn't want it to look easy. "He wants it to look like there's some kind of struggle."

Barton's "LIFT" supplies another set of challenges. At one point, the rhythmically complex music by Curtis Macdonald makes the dancers count to 107.

According to Mack, the movement slows and picks up speed unpredictably. "It was almost like putting together mathematical equations," she says.

In comparison, "D-Man in the Waters" feels giddy. Although this 1989 piece has a tragic subtext—choreographed as a member of Jones' company was dying—the most obvious thing about "D-Man" is its love of life.

"You're sliding on your stomach, and jumping into people's arms," says Douthit. "It's one of those pieces where you just let go of everything, and you have this amazing time."

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Where: New York City Center, 55th Street between Sixth and Seventh avenues

When: Wednesday at 7 p.m. (opening night), then through Jan. 5: Tuesdays through Thursdays at 7:30 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 7:30 p.m., with matinees Saturdays at 2 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m.

How much: \$25 to \$150; call (212) 581-1212 or visit nycitycenter.org.