

GREATER NEW YORK

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21st-Century Ballet

At the Alvin Ailey Opening Night Gala **A25**

HEARD & SCENE

Opening Melds Modern Ballet With Ailey's Signature Work

By PIA CATTON

When Robert Battle, the artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, addressed the audience on opening night at New York City Center, he brought a prop along with him: a seat belt.

"Next year," he joked, "we're going to sell them in the gift shop."

The gag referred to the wild ride which the British choreographer Wayne McGregor took the dancers and audience on, with his contemporary ballet "Chroma."

Mr. McGregor is one of Europe's aggressive dance innovators, and his style calls for movement that switches from ugly to lyrical to stunningly beautiful all in the space of one minute.

"It's like you're doodling with your body," dancer Alicia Graf Mack said afterward at the Wednesday-night gala dinner. "It feels like you are etching a sketch through space."

"It's 21st-century ballet," said associate artistic director Masazumi Chaya, who wore a bow tie made of shoestrings created by the Japanese designer Matsuda.

The dinner was hosted in a ballroom at the New York Hilton, which was transformed by designer and Ailey board member David E. Monn into a winter wonderland, complete with a carpet of white Astro-Turf and video projections of snowflakes.

A master of ceremonies announced each Ailey dancer one-by-one, and when all of them had arrived, the band played Whitney Houston's "I

Wanna Dance With Somebody," and, befitting a dance company's gala, most able-bodied people flocked to the dance floor.

In addition to the actress Gabrielle Union ("Bring It On"), an honorary chair of the evening, and Daisha, Ms. Mack's 24-year-old sister, who recently signed an Epic Records contract with producer L.A. Reid, gala guests included Joan and Sanford Weill, Mr. McGregor, choreographer Liz Gerring, Tawana Tibbs and Bruce Gordon.

Seated at a table with artistic director emerita Judith Jamison was one of America's most celebrated sopranos, Jessye Norman, who sang along when the band played the gospel song "Total Praise." Other guests sang, too, but even *sotto voce*, Ms. Norman attracted notice.

Spirituals are an integral part of Alvin Ailey's repertory, as established by Ailey's signature 1960 work "Revelations," which was performed with live music at City Center in honor of the gala and season kickoff.

"Revelations' fills your heart," said Broadway producer Daryl Roth, who attended both events. "I'm just a rabid fan."

The contrast between Ailey's "Revelations" and Mr. McGregor's "Chroma" is all part of Mr. Battle's plan to expand the company's range.

"You see something people don't expect from Ailey," said executive director Bennett Rink. "And then you're on a roller coaster."

Cue the seat belts.



Clockwise from below right: Gabrielle Union and dancer Michael Francis McBride; Alvin Ailey's Daniel Harder and Hope Boykin with chef Marcus Samuelsson; Kathryn and Kenneth Chenault; artistic director Robert Battle; and Sanford and Joan Weill. Above, the dinner after the performance.



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