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IN PERFORMANCE

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater ★★★ 1/2

Alvin Ailey leaps in new directions

BY SID SMITH

Special to the Tribune

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Company, long one of the nation's more cherished troupes, is testing the waters of its Chicago popularity with an extended, two-week stay at the Auditorium Theatre, offering three separate lineups through March 17.

One thing is clear: Choreographer Robert Battle, now in his second season as artistic director, is taking the troupe in new directions while maintaining its beloved traditions. Boldly, he has introduced European choreographer Jiri Kylian's wry, dry wit into this programming, and

the stroke is inspired, Kylian's "Petite Mort" a great fit for the company and a huge hit with the audience, judging from Friday's performance.

Meanwhile, with Kyle Abraham's "Another Night," Battle continues the Ailey tradition of showcasing American talent and indigenous style; it's a rousing piece set to Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia" and a snazzy, jazzy onstage party for the troupe's current crop of talented dancers.

Chief among them are Jacqueline Green, whose satiny, fluid solos anchor the work, and Renaldo Gardner (from Gary,

Ind., by the way), whose rubbery antics highlight one section. (His character's solicitation for applause is one of the few elements of the dance that don't work so well.) "Another Night" is fast, fun-loving and especially skillful at echoing in dance the shifting rhythms and meandering melodies of jazz, Abraham ingeniously and often changing direction, at times suggesting the work is making itself up as it goes along.

Battle's own work, "Strange Humors," from 1998, is characteristic of his style — borderline cartoon-like and highly imaginative in gesture. It's abstract, and yet, as Battle likes to do, it hints at a relationship between its two male performers, one of partnership and tension, alliance and conflict, played out in a mini-symphony of wriggling legs and high kicks. Kirven James Boyd and Samuel Lee Roberts danced it superbly Friday.

"Petite Mort," with its floating dress forms and enigmatic swordplay, is especially effective in its opening starring the men, the work's veiled imagery of warfare and sensual power unmistakably telegraphed. The duets that culminate the work are unusually sharp and focused here.

The nightly Ailey outing of "Revelations" included a powerful rendering of the "I Wanna Be Ready" solo by Matthew Rushing.

When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Thursday and Friday; 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday; and 3 p.m. Sunday through March 17

Where: Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress Parkway

Tickets: \$32-\$92; 800-982-2787 or ticketmaster.com/auditorium