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Freedom Space:

Chroma by Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater



This winter, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater brought a little bit of warmth to New York with its production of *Chroma*, choreographer Wayne McGregor's contemporary ballet with a score by Joby Talbot and orchestrations by the rock duo The White Stripes. Minimalist architect John Pawson designed the luminous set, which premiered in 2006 at the Royal

Ballet in London's Covent Garden but had to be reengineered, as Alvin Ailey planned to tour for five months with it.

The choice to have Pawson design the set was very specific, as McGregor drew inspiration for the ballet's choreography from Pawson's extended visual essay *Minimum*, which explores the idea of simplicity in architecture. On the Ailey web site, McGregor says,

"On reading John Pawson's *Minimum*, I was captivated by this notion of subtraction, the 'essential' space, which seems to reduce elements to make visible the invisible. Intriguingly, although Pawson's designs do give definition to space(s), they are somehow always boundary-less. This potential 'freedom space' would be an extraordinary environment for a new choreography, where the grammar and articulation of the body is made crystal clear, graphic, and unmediated. It could be a space where the body becomes absolutely architectural. At the same time, in creating volume(s) of tone for the choreography to inhabit the body can behave as a frequency of color—in freedom from white: *CHROMA*."

The set is a wood-frame box covered with a velour liner and painted bleached muslin, creating a seamless box even though it is constructed of a number of pieces, says Al Crawford, lighting director of Alvin Ailey. "The set breaks down for transport into quite a number of smaller pieces. Once loaded in, it reps into place as five large units and a number of smaller elements like floor ramps and returns," he says. Hudson Scenic Studio, of Yonkers, New York, built the set.

The set posed other challenges. "One thing we learned very quickly is that a perfect white box is one of the most difficult things to achieve,"

Crawford says. "It was about finding the right surfaces." The grain of fabric and paint treatment had to be reflective, adjustable, and easy to maintain throughout the tour, he adds. It also had to work well with climate change in transport, as the tour travels through dynamically different weather.

The minimalism flowed over into Lucy Carter's lighting design, which was tweaked slightly by the Ailey Company. The dancers are bathed in white light for most of the production, with powerfully subtle color added through pale greens and pinks until the moment when set is washed with vibrant blue. "There's something very powerful about how she holds back color and releases it at just the most emotional moments in the ballet," Crawford says. "From a design perspective, the study in the variables of white light really creates a beautiful atmosphere for the dancers."

In addition to Alvin Ailey's repertory lighting plot, the rig includes 24 Chroma-Q Studio Force Phosphor LEDs, six Chroma-Q Studio Force V72 LEDs, two Chroma-Q Studio Force V48 LEDs, 14 custom-built Chroma-Q ColorSpan 2s, seven custom-built Chroma-Q ColorSpan 2s, eight Martin Professional Viper Performance moving lights, and 14 Altman Lighting T-3 cyc lights.

The company decided to use LEDs for much of *Chroma* based on their ability to tour, performance reliability, and electrical concerns, Crawford says. "In the past, some of the integrated elements were done with either fluorescents or conventional strip-lights," he says. "With the introduction of LED, we have been able to keep our cable infrastructure to a minimum due to low power consumption."

Although the Royal Ballet uses followspots from above on a bridge position, the venues on the tour required spot lighting to be done from front cove positions. Crawford says Carter used a variety of techniques to pull the dancers off the set. "Her technique in

Chroma is unique in the dance world, where she is pushing and pulling them against the background without the use of traditional sidelight. It's so successful, especially in *Chroma*, that they sometimes fall into the landscape and at others they are all you can see. I think it's a powerful dynamic. The walls are being lit from a number of different angles very selectively. It's a careful use of followspots to hit the set as little as possible and make the dancer glow from within."

The company will perform at The

Kennedy Center in Washington, DC at the beginning of February and tour throughout the US until May 12 in Newark, New Jersey. "This is a significant piece for an American repertory dance company," he says. "It's a piece that was a true investment not just financially but also artistically. It was successful due to a very strong collaboration and communication between Alvin Ailey, Wayne McGregor, and the team from The Royal Ballet."—

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