

Dressing 'Odetta': How Alvin Ailey Staged a Dancing Civil Rights Musician

December 15th 2014

by Ashley Lee



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Hope Boykin in Matthew Rushing's 'Odetta'

Steve Wilson

brought her life and her art together and changed the world," Rushing tells *The Hollywood Reporter* of his third work for the dance company. "She wasn't really on the front lines of protests or in groups, she wasn't the one sitting at the counters of establishments or things like that. But she did what she did with what she had."

Among audio clips of interviews, the piece spans the varied repertoire of the influential American folk legend: alongside the musician's signature concert kickoff and closing pick "This Little Light of Mine," the work includes her "Freedom Trilogy," "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," "Glory, Glory" and a cover of "Masters of War" by **Bob Dylan**. "I was even more impressed with how she took those different genres and Odetta-fied them — you hear country [in "Ox Driver" and "Cool Water"], but you hear blues and jazz too," Rushing says of selecting songs, also spotlighting her playful duet of "A Hole in the Bucket" with **Harry Belafonte**. "A lot of Odetta's material is really heavy — prison songs, protest songs, even the Negro spirituals can be really heavy at times. But what I saw was she was a very diverse artist. She loved musical theater, she did a couple albums for children! I wanted to show that side of her, as well as break up the weight of the piece."

Throughout the piece, dancers transform benches into train cars and stage platforms, while dressed in outfits seemingly assembled by patchwork.



"He wanted the dancers to look like they were making their own clothes — there's community, they don't have a lot of resources, they're trying to survive. I needed it to look like that and have that energy, without looking like a complete rag-muffin!" laughs costume designer **Dante Baylor**. Particularly, lead dancer **Hope Boykin** looks as if she's borrowing fabrics from her close friends



onstage. "All the elements that are in all of the other characters' outfits are in her dress as well."

While Rushing strategized solos to either showcase a dancer's strengths or pushed them to improve on their weaknesses, he ran into his own roadblocks while choreographing for her "Masters of War" cover. "The lyrics, they're so piercing — to listen to some of the things Bob Dylan wrote and Odetta sings are so intimidating," he explains of her cover, therefore adding a love-related subplot with which viewers can identify. The sequence has male dancers putting on helmets, bullet belts and other military armor as they are torn from their families and undergo wartime training. Adds Baylor of the

mini-narrative, "We decided to focus specifically on the Vietnam War, and have them pick up elements that suggest it without doing a full costume change or being cartoonish."

Yet the most difficult track to conceptualize was "John Henry," says Rushing. "It's about a man who was so strong that he was put up against machinery and won, and what I found was that African-American people found strength in this story that they passed on to younger generations," he explains. "The way she sang it, there was an edge — all of these growls that made me go to some other place. It made me think about me being a black man, being raised around other black men and having an edge, a responsibility to take care of your family but having a bad reputation of not following through, ending up in prison, dealing drugs or being involved in gangs. I know a lot of people in my family who have that edge about having to prove their masculinity and feeling like they're on the defense. I incorporated that. The clapping is almost like society's agitation, and yet you still have to keep your composure and hold on to your manhood."

Despite the laborious creative process, Rushing hopes audiences leave *Odetta* performances with optimism. "At **Ruby Dee's** memorial, I remember there was this quote in the program: 'Those who know enough about the past know enough to hope.'"

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs at New York City Center through Jan. 4.

