

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

February 28, 2014

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater maintains identity, grows with art form

Alicia Graf Mack and Vernard Gilmore dance
Wayne McGregor's "Chroma." (PAUL ROBERTS)

New
revelations





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SUN-TIMES
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When Robert Battle assumed the artistic leadership of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 2011, he stepped into the formidable footsteps of Ailey himself, who created his unique company of African-American dancers in 1958, and dancer Judith Jamison, who helped keep the company alive after Ailey's death in 1989. Still, he arrived with a well-defined mission.

Here was a company of astonishing dancers who continually circled the globe. But their repertoire did not always live up to their talent and range. The quandary? How do you maintain the Ailey's identity, yet at the same time grow with the art form? How do you balance both the racial and "post-racial" nature of the world in dance terms? But then there was this: Wasn't Ailey himself a master of melding the blues and gospel and flavor of black life with both modern dance and ballet technique?

From the start, Battle, 41, a graduate of the Juilliard School, was open to the full range of contemporary choreographers, tapping the work of such established African-American artists as Ronald K. Brown, Garth Fagan, Bill T. Jones and Kyle Abraham, while also challenging his dancers with work by Aszure Barton, Wayne McGregor, Jiri Kylian, Ohad Naharin and Paul Taylor. The result? Not only have the Ailey dancers thrived on new challenges, but they have put their indelible stamp on both new and existing pieces.

During the course of its two-week engagement (Feb. 28-March 9) at the Auditorium Theatre, the Ailey company will honor its past with Ailey's masterwork, "Revelations" (the finale for every performance), and a program featuring his three pieces set to the music of Duke Ellington ("The River," "Night Creature" and "Pas de Duke"). But it's the four Chicago premieres — Aszure Barton's "LIFT," created specially for the Ailey

dancers; Wayne McGregor's "Chroma," initially choreographed for Britain's Royal Ballet; Bill T. Jones' 1989 "D-Man in the Waters, Part I" and Ronald K. Brown's Afro-infused spiritual evocation, "Four Corners" — that may be real revelations.

Barton first saw the company when she was growing up in Edmonton, Canada — "an unforgettable experience" — and then met Battle in the Juilliard dorms when, more than 20 years ago, her older sister was a student at the school. She became a big fan of his choreography, which "had such an infectious sense of humor and musicality."

"Of course when Robert invited me to make a piece for Ailey I was thrilled," Barton said. "It had never crossed my mind that such a thing would happen. And while I had followed the company for years, I didn't really know the current dancers, so he brought me out to California last April to watch them in class, rehearsal and performance, and I got a good taste of their energy and earthy power before I started. What I noticed was how very individual they were, though they are joined by this sacred, celebratory sensibility that I love." (Barton choreographs to the personalities in the room, and the inspired rewards of this process were clear in "Untouched" which she created for Hubbard Street Dance Chicago in 2010.)

"I tried to have every person in the studio contribute to the piece," she said. "There is a lot of unison work in it — I like the power of numbers — but then I pull individuals out. The score, devised specially by Curtis Macdonald, is highly rhythmic, hard-driving and percussive, and the Ailey dancers have a special ability to tap into the layers of those rhythms. The costumes [with rich folk-style

textures] are something they might wear now, with a lot of movement in the dresses for the women, and the men shirtless because the curve of their spines is so beautiful I wanted it to be visible."

As for the title of her piece: "While choreographing 'LIFT' I was reading a self-help book and saw the word in the middle of a sentence, and it popped out at me again when I was on my computer. I'm a big believer in the idea that we notice things we want to see."

Like almost everyone else on the planet, Wayne McGregor, resident choreographer of the Royal Ballet since 2006, became an Ailey convert by way of "Revelations," which he first saw during the company's many visits to London in the 1980s, followed while studying dance in New York, and more recently has kept up with by way of YouTube.

"The last time I was in New York I visited the Ailey studios and met with Robert and [associate artistic director] Masazumi Chaya," said McGregor, who was in Moscow with his company Random Dance when we chatted recently. "Robert had seen my piece, 'Chroma,' and said he loved it for the 'interesting way it used bodies in space,' and he thought that because the Ailey's physical signature was so different from that of a ballet company it could 'contaminate the piece in interesting ways.'"

"The Ailey has two incredible casts for 'Chroma,' and both are amazing," said McGregor, whose piece for 10 dancers is set to a driving score by Joby Talbot with orchestrations of songs by The White Stripes, and with a luminous set by minimalist architect John Pawson. (The costumes for the Ailey production are in more vibrant hues than those for the original because McGregor "wanted them to play off the dancers' darker skin tones and the white light of the set.")

"The Ailey dancers' training and musculature is different from most ballet dancers, and there is a sense of equal power in the male and female dancers that makes the duets really exciting. They have multiple languages in their bodies, with their ribs and hips already mobilized. I also am excited by how fully engaged Ailey's audiences are compared to those for ballet."



ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER, FEB. 28-MARCH 9. Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress. \$27-\$92. (800) 982-2787; AuditoriumTheatre.org.