

# The Star-Ledger Newark

May 09, 2014

DANCE

## Duking it out at NJPAC

WORKS CREATED IN 1970S TO THE MUSIC

OF DUKE ELLINGTON STAND THE TEST OF TIME

**By Robert Johnson**  
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

As the associate artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, which returns to the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark this weekend, Masazumi Chaya can drop into the studio anytime and watch any rehearsal he pleases.

He didn't always have that privilege, however, and remembers one time in particular, in 1976, when rehearsals were off-limits. The company's late founder had sequestered himself in a studio on West 61st Street in Manhattan, where he was creating a duet for two of the greatest dancers of the age: Judith Jamison and Soviet defector Mikhail Baryshnikov.

"Misha (Baryshnikov) was very shy," Chaya explains, and Ailey's jazz-inflected dance language was unfamiliar to him. Chaya himself was fairly new to the company then, and despite a healthy curiosity, he only managed to peek inside that room occasionally.

Although the duet, called "Pas de Duke," might have been one of those gala-night extravaganzas that vanish with the champagne, the piece has had staying power. That's because its music, by Duke Ellington, is so beautiful, Chaya says — and because

the format is easy for an audience to read, with brilliantly contrasting solos and partnering sections in which the dancers' mock rivalry acquires sensual overtones.

Today, "Pas de Duke" retains its provocative, hot-and-cold dynamic shifts, and the fluidity that Jamison brought to her arm movements, even if some of Baryshnikov's virtuosic steps have disappeared. The man's part, Chaya says, is now based on a "show business" version with "more high kicks and lots of personality" that Ailey made for Paris Opera Ballet star Patrick Dupond, who performed the piece with Donna Wood in the 1980s. "Pas de Duke" now features charismatic Ailey performers such as Linda Celeste Sims and Antonio Douthit-Boyd and challenges youngsters like Jacqueline Green and Sean Carmon to reach for the sky.

In Newark, the Ailey company will perform "Pas de Duke" on a program dedicated to Ellington. Ailey revered the great composer, with whom he collaborated on "The River," a piece made for American Ballet Theatre in 1970. After Ellington's death in 1974, Ailey created "Night Creature" for a televised tribute leading up to a festival of Ellington ballets in 1976 that was modeled on the Stravinsky Festival that New York City Ballet had

staged a few years earlier.

As in "Pas de Duke," classical ballet exerts a prominent influence in "Night Creature" and "The River," which incorporate and blend different vocabularies.

This weekend, two forceful personalities, Akua Noni Parker and Hope Boykin, will alternate as the female lead in "Night Creature," a whimsical look at poseurs and thrill-seekers riding high on their own glamour. "The River" has a more elaborate scenario, in which the twists and turns of a mighty river reflect the course of a man's life.

Again, the piece was conceived as a showcase for stars — Natalia Makarova and Erik Bruhn were in the original cast at ABT — although in a teasing duet like "Giggling Rapids," Ailey satirizes their one-upmanship.

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### **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater**

**Where:** Prudential Hall at New Jersey Performing Arts Center, 1 Center St., Newark

**When:** Saturday at 8 p.m., Sunday at 1 and 5 p.m.

**How much:** \$49 to \$89; call (888) 466-5722 or visit [njpac.org](http://njpac.org).