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Variations on the undulant torso

DANCE

Premieres at Ailey

Lincoln Center, New York

★★★★☆

Apollinaire Scherr

Since Robert Battle assumed the helm of the Alvin Ailey troupe four years ago, the complaint that its dances are not equal to its magnificent dancers has become less and less valid.

For repertory, Battle has stretched far beyond the usual Ailey-affiliated talent to achieve a deeper coherence in the collection of dances. Surface affinities used to preside: the works had themes in common. Now you find through-lines in the choreography and in the language. The Battle additions are not only better individually, they also speak to each other. And

the conversation is interesting.

The two programmes I caught of the four at Lincoln Center (until Sunday) offered intriguing variations on the undulant torso, descended from west African dance. The 1932 solo *Awassa Astrige* (*Ostrich Dance*) hails from the Harlem Renaissance beginnings of black concert dance, without which Alvin Ailey's mighty *Revelations* might not have come to be. *Ostrich's* creator, Sierra Leonean émigré Asadata Dafora, was one of the first choreographers to fashion African communal and ritual dances for the stage.

In this mesmerising four-minute piece, Antonio Douthit-Boyd's long muscular arms undulated from shoulder to fingertip to indicate the male bird ruffling his wide swathe of wing to intimidate predators or to prepare to mate. Pitching his hips

back as he advanced on tiptoe, the dancer evoked the large oval body that seems always to be out ahead of the animal's spindly legs. His gaze darted about in typical bird fashion, but otherwise nothing was rushed.

Douthit-Boyd emphasised the ostrich's fluidity over its twitchiness. He found strangeness in its imperturbability. Dafora captures the bird's alien beauty through the dancer's alienation from the human. For this choreographer, theatre works by powers of estrangement.

Robert Moses' *The Pleasure of the Lesson* also featured bent arms and fluid torso. But the arms in this veteran San Francisco choreographer's Ailey debut were often thrown overhead like the branches of a scraggly tree, and the torso didn't just curve, it seemed to absorb negative space like a sponge. Individuals were constantly merging together, then returning to distinctness.

Community has always been a concern at Ailey, but Moses has a postmodern sense of the tribe's loose and ever-shifting nature. *Pleasure* began with the five women facing off against the five men. One at a time the women approached the wall of men and flattened themselves against it until they blended in.

For a stupendous 15 minutes, recognisable geometries sprang up, only to disintegrate, replaced by imploding clusters. *The Pleasure of the Lesson* carried on for another 15 minutes, however, after its unusual spirit of sensual tenacity had deflated. But that such a mood might arise from the alchemy of sophisticated structure and delicate language suggests what a bright new era Ailey has entered.



Mesmerising:
Antonio
Douthit-Boyd
in 'Awassa
Astrige'
(*Ostrich
Dance*)

Paul Kolnik