

The New York Times

JUNE 18, 2014

He Can Fly, in a Flash, Right Before Your Eyes

By GIA KOURLAS


In 1982, David Parsons made his greatest choreographic discovery: He invented a way for a dancer to fly.

“Caught,” his signature work that stars a soloist soaring through the air and a strobe light, may last only about five minutes. But this seemingly simple recipe of light and movement results in pure exhilaration. The piece is part of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater’s current season at the David H. Koch Theater at Lincoln Center. Robert Battle, Ailey’s artistic director, is a former member of Parsons Dance.

“I enjoy touching people in a universal way,” Mr. Parsons, 54, said in an interview. “Most people have dreamed of flying. It’s something we’ve all experienced in some form in our subconscious.”

In the dance, set to music by

ONLINE: VIDEO

 The choreographer David Parsons talks about his work “Caught”:

nytimes.com/dance

Robert Fripp, a soloist — usually a man — performs 100 jumps in quick succession as a strobe light freezes the airborne images like a series of snapshots. Essentially, the dancer is caught — get it? — as he circles the stage in dynamic leaps or jumps up to curl his body into a ball.

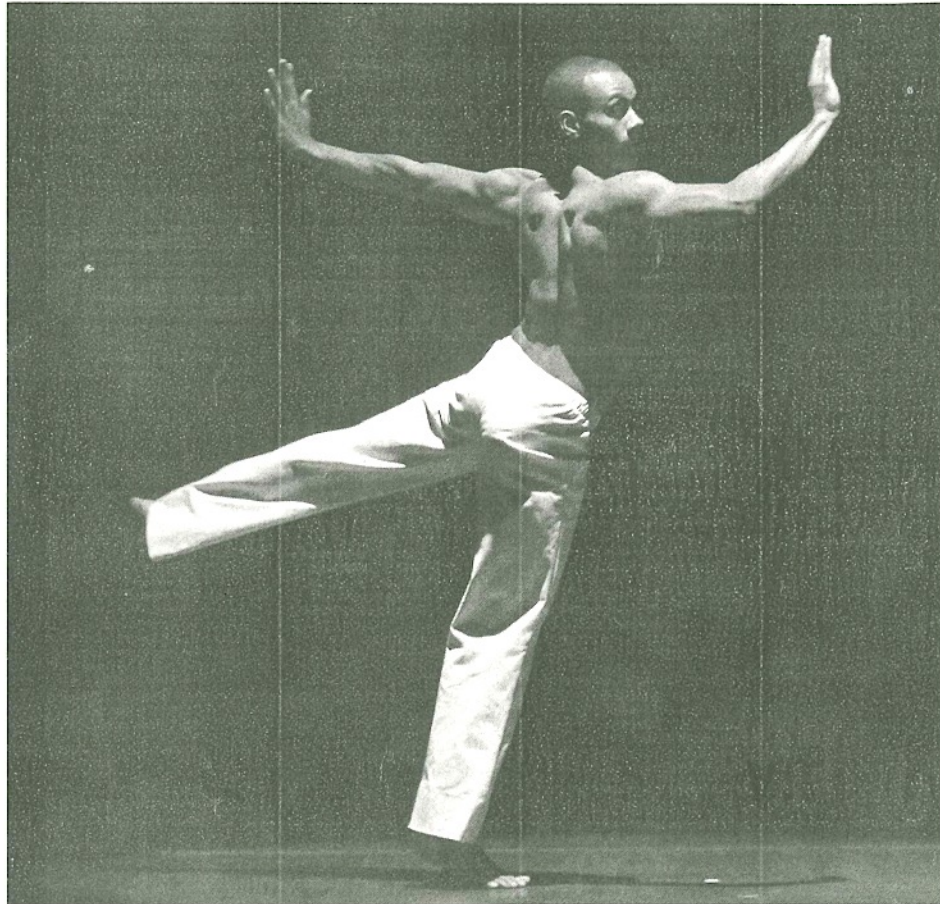
In another moment, the dancer is captured walking, with his legs and arms stretched long.

“It’s so simple,” Mr. Parsons said of the pose. “We call that the Johnnie Walker.”

But he refused to reveal how the illusion works. “I absolutely do not know how it’s done,” he insisted, with a touch of deadpan.

Even if he won’t talk about it, some of his former dancers have revealed the trick; in “Caught,” the performer uses a remote control to activate the strobe. Still, the jumps are only the culmination of the solo, which begins more meditatively as the dancer glides from one spotlight to the next in an enigmatic display of form and fervor.

When Mr. Parsons performed it he felt like a shaman, he said. “I was putting a spell on the audience,” he explained. “It was my way of getting to be able to fly.



ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Kirven Douthit-Boyd performing “Caught,” at the David H. Koch Theater last week.

The Ailey troupe in a David Parsons work.

The guy wasn’t just going to take off. He had to go through a ritual and then he could fly.”

The origins of “Caught” date to when Mr. Parsons was 17 and arrived in New York as a scholarship student at the Ailey School.

“I cleaned the studios for my scholarship, and at the same time, I started to get into photography as a stunt model. I was a trampolinist and a gymnast out of Kansas City, and I could do the things that models couldn’t do. I was a photographer myself and after a while I figured out how to fire a strobe light with the dancer in a dark space and catch him at the top of a leap.”

“Caught” has been interpreted by many superb dancers over the years, including Angel Corella and Vladimir Malakhov. (At Ailey, Kirven Douthit-Boyd and Michael Francis McBride alternate in the part through Sunday.) As for Mr. Parsons’s favorite?

“Me,” he said with a surprised laugh. “Because you can’t see it anymore.”

Mr. Parsons couldn’t recall the last time he performed the piece. “It’s been a long time,” he said. “At this point, it’s a very dangerous piece for an old man to do.”

Watch the ‘Learning to Fly’ video [here](#)