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Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater premiere: Robert Moses' new 'Lesson' is a pleasure

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With its blank surfaces like molded plastic, the set for Wayne McGregor's ballet "Chroma" suggests one of those anonymous places, like an airport lounge, that empty the modern world of signifiers.

Re-assembled for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's return engagement now underway at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the scenery in "Chroma" deflects a visitor's gaze returning him immediately to a sanitized present. In such an environment, only the human body reminds us of all we have left behind. Ailey dancers like the fabulously expressive Akua Noni Parker, clinging to Jeroboam Bozeman's arm as he drags her upstage, bring this space alive.



Linda Celeste Sims and Kirven Douthit-Boyd in The Pleasure of the Lesson' Paul Kolnik

"Chroma" is light-years away from "Revelations," which closes the first of four exquisite programs with a nostalgic evocation of the late

Alvin Ailey's childhood. Here gossips fan themselves in the heat of a dusty afternoon; celebrants immerse themselves in a river; and people pray devoutly for deliverance. Viewers can only shake their heads in wonder, reflecting upon how far this troupe has come since it was founded in 1958.

Yet while the Ailey company has lengthened its reach, its mission remains the same. The troupe is dedicated to preserving works like "Awassa Astrige/Ostrich," the watershed solo from 1932 that seems to match the art of Pavlova (those winding arms) with pride in an African heritage. Antonio Douthit-Boyd danced this piece sinuously yet with sharply etched authority on Friday. This company also continues to offer African-American choreographers greater visibility. Hence the premiere on Thursday of "The Pleasure of the Lesson" by Bay Area choreographer Robert Moses.

Tightly focused, "The Lesson" finds its subject in the space between the sexes. As it opens, five men stand in a line facing an equal number of women. Rachel McLaren easily crosses the narrow shaft of air to rub against a man she clasps in a loose embrace. From here, "The Lesson" will reveal itself as a delicate dance in which the lightest touch produces arousal, and electricity travels through the body in waves.

As if to prevent this energy from getting out of hand, Moses encloses it within rigorous formal structures. The choreographer begins by taking the opening line of men and laying it flat on the floor. First the men become a "blanket" whose undulations suggest McLaren's restless thoughts; and then they become a path where she treads gingerly. Subsequent duets vary in their details rather than in overall tone. "The Lesson" only hints at private dramas; and Moses seems less interested in shaping characters than in telegraphing psychological states giving wonderful dancers like McLaren and Renaldo Gardner, or Linda Celeste Sims and Kirven Douthit-Boyd chances to display their lyricism.

Though the dancing is voluptuous, the women hug themselves protectively and not everyone surrenders. The final image feels tense as Jacqueline Green nuzzles Antonio Douthit-Boyd and he retreats, his outspread arms withholding tenderness.

"The Lesson" is well worth a visit this week, but there is more. Ailey fans should not miss the chance to see Bill T. Jones' "D-Man in the Waters" and Ronald K. Brown's "Grace" on a stage that amplifies their impact and acknowledges their brilliance.