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By Cynthia Bond Perry | February 14, 2014

DANCE

## Ailey company shows the power of history to inspire

Tribute to Odetta proves a crowd-pleaser in its Atlanta debut.

By Cynthia Bond Perry  
For the AJC

It's said that Odetta, American folk singer-songwriter and activist, was so meticulous when researching traditional black prison songs that she once tried to break rocks with a sledgehammer to understand how convicts felt when singing those songs.

Born Odetta Holmes, her care in excavating emotion in these songs — often retooled for civil rights protests

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At myAJC.com/living, you'll find our preview of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater run at the Fox Theatre, including an interview with artistic director Robert Battle.

— earned her the distinction among many as voice of the civil rights movement.

It was fitting for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to commemorate the Civil Rights Act's 50th anniversary in 2014 with a tribute to Holmes. Choreographed by Ailey rehearsal director and guest artist Matthew Rushing, "Odetta" received its Atlanta pre-

miere Thursday evening at the Fox Theatre alongside Ulysses Dove's 1984 "Bad Blood" and Ailey's "Revelations."

The program reflected Ailey's mission to serve as a repository for historic modern dance works, to nurture emerging choreographers and to present dance masterworks while celebrating African-American culture. The appealing mix of old, new and classic pieces demonstrated the value in preserving history and its power to bring fresh inspiration to everyday things.

"Bad Blood," is a welcome revival. To music by Laurie Anderson and Peter Gabriel,

Dance continued on D7



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performers Yannick Lebrun and Rachael McLaren dance in Ulysses Dove's "Bad Blood." CONTRIBUTED BY STEVE WILSON

### Dance

continued from D1

dancers in white appear stark against a black background stage set with a bench and seven ropes strung from opposing directions that are knotted at the center.

Dancers whip through turns; their hard-edged, angular forms recalling Keith Haring's outlined figures that appeared on New York subway walls around the time the work was created. A man falls to his knees, spinning while a seated woman stiffly ignores him; later, women repeatedly throw themselves at men who catch them, but drop them indifferently, suggesting an emotional disconnect. The work has great dynamic impact; images combine with Anderson's and Gabriel's words to evocative effect.

"Odetta" is Rushing's third work for the company. The ambitious undertaking drew an impressive array of individual performances from dancers, but could benefit from a bit more chiseling. Rush-

#### DANCE REVIEW

**Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater**  
2 and 8 p.m. today, 3 p.m. Sunday. \$25-\$70. Fox Theatre, 660 Peachtree St. N.E., Atlanta. 404-881-2100. [www.foxtheatre.org](http://www.foxtheatre.org). or 855-285-8499. [www.alvinaleyw.org/atlanta](http://www.alvinaleyw.org/atlanta).

ing's biographical work in 10 sections largely avoids historical context, choosing simply to honor the artist and focus on her life journey using art to inspire social change.

Dante Baylor's earth-toned costumes reflect the Folk revival's "patchwork quilt" of cultural influences. As Odetta's spirit and voice, Hope Boykin embodies the artist's warmth, radiance and mobilizing power through a rich vocabulary of rhythmic strides, rock-solid extensions and fluid hip and shoulder isolations. Generous arm gestures beckon toward her audience.

Rachael McClaren and

Marcus Willis show comic gifts in "There's A Hole In The Bucket." Standouts also include Kanji Segawa's solo, "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" as well as Sarah Daley and Yannick Lebrun in "Cool Water." But too often, group patterns are predictable and lack visual tension. The ballet was a crowd-pleaser on Thursday, nonetheless.

In the end, "Odetta" tries too hard to be uplifting without enough depth to be earth-shaking. There is room to dig deeper.

Odetta was a contemporary of Ailey; delving into her history seemed to breath new life into "Revelations." Boykin led the opening "I Been Buked" group with new found emotional intensity. McLaren warmly invited us to witness her baptismal transformation; the "Sinner Man" trio possessed stunning athleticism. Finally, "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham" rang out a clear message that for Ailey artists, dance is religion and the stage moment is glorious.