

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## Kyle Abraham, Choreographer on the Move

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STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Celebrated choreographer Kyle Abraham observes dancers as they rehearse at New York City Center.

## Full Dance Card Keeps Choreographer on Move

By LIZZIE SIMON

In the coming weeks there will be little rest for choreographer Kyle Abraham.

Earlier this month, his company, Abraham.In.Motion, opened its season at the Joyce Theater. On Dec. 9, the first installment of his piece "Untitled America" will have its world premiere at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. And on Dec. 11, another world premiere will be presented at Juilliard in the program "New Dances."

Meanwhile, he recently moved from a three-bedroom apartment in Windsor Terrace to a one-bedroom apartment in Chelsea. "Everything's in boxes," he said.

Does the 38-year-old chore-

ographer thrive on chaos?

"No," he said emphatically. "If you catch the light right, you'll see my hives coming in."

There hasn't been much rest in quite some time for the Pittsburgh native, who is best known for exploring identity and culture and for weaving together traditional modern dance with more contemporary urban styles.

Between 2010 and 2013 alone, he was bestowed many of his field's highest honors: a Bessie Award, a USA Ford Fellowship, a Princess Grace Award, a Jacob's Pillow Dance Award and a MacArthur Genius Award. Ubiquitous in contemporary dance, he has begun broadening his circles of influ-

Please see *DANCE* page A23



## DANCE

*Continued from page A19*  
ence. In October, he choreographed a feature-length film, "The Book of Henry," by "Jurassic World" director Colin Trevorrow.

Mr. Abraham's process of making dances often begins in his living room. "In a frustrated place or a sad place, I'm drawn to move. Intuitively, that's what happens," he said. "It's the most honest exploration and unencumbered proclamation: This is who I am and this is what I stand for."

Less intuitive perhaps is building the institutional structure to support his work. Mr. Abraham currently serves as both artistic and executive director of his company.

His dancers each take on nonartistic roles in the company, for example, in fundraising or education, and earn an annual salary with health insurance. They tour extensively, with out-of-town engagements comprising about 70% of earned income.

In recent months, Mr. Abraham has been searching for an executive director: "It needs a base. A seesaw without that base is not going to work."

His all-live-music program at the Joyce included old and new pieces arranged, he said, "like a mixtape. I think about what sounds good next to something else. It's based on sound."

The evening featured a New York premiere, "Absent Matter," a collaboration with drummer Otis Brown III and jazz pianist and composer Kris Bowers, a 26 year-old Juilliard graduate who won the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Piano Competition in 2011. The piece explored police brutality, juxtaposing '90s rappers prophesying their own deaths with more current voices of

protest.

"In true Debbie Downer fashion, I was thinking of all of the self-proclaimed deaths in music," said Mr. Abraham.

In the piece Mr. Bowers, like Mr. Abraham, combined his classical training with hip-hop influences, adding samples of music and text to the music played by a three-member ensemble.

"What I like about Kyle," said Mr. Bowers, "is his incorporation of the colloquial, the balance between the more lyrical and the more pop forms of dancing."

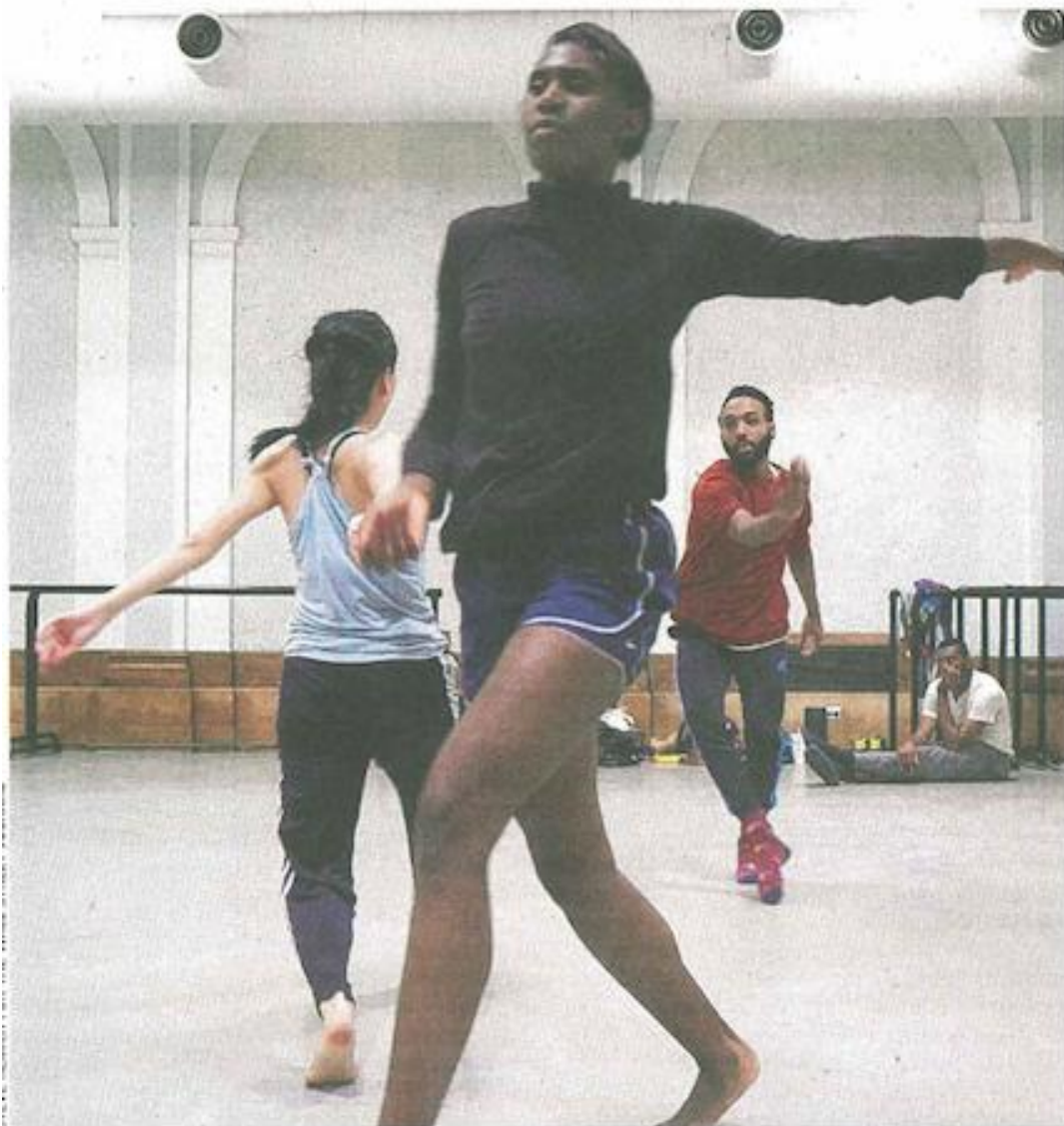
Mr. Abraham's commission for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, "Untitled America," also takes on a tough topic, the legacy of incarceration on families. Having observed the work in rehearsal, Ailey Artistic Director Robert Battle called it "very poetic and intimate." Set to a score, "Father, Father" by Laura Mvula, "It has a childlike quality that's very poignant and unexpected," he said.

"Untitled America" marks the first time in Alvin Ailey history that the company has commissioned a multiyear work. "I was attracted to that," Mr. Battle said, "because I've been looking for ways to invite more time and space for process."

Mr. Abraham said he finds the expanded time frame invaluable for delving deeper into his chosen themes: "I can get to know the dancers more. I can take risks. I want to have a rich conversation to make the movement rich."

His first commission for Ailey in 2012 wasn't as overtly political: "Another Night," an exuberant large-scale piece inspired by Mr. Ailey's relationship to jazz. "Somebody, whose name I won't mention, said to me, 'You don't want to alienate your audience the first time out of the gate. Do you. But don't go to an extreme.'"

Mr. Abraham took it as wise counsel. "But I thought, next time I'm given this opportunity, I really want to go there."



Dancers rehearse 'Abstract Matters,' an Abraham.In.Motion collaboration, at New York City Center.