

ENTERTAINMENT

DANCE

'Odetta' a new masterpiece for Alvin Ailey



HEDY WEISS

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is back in town for its annual season at the Auditorium Theatre, and it has brought with it a new masterpiece: Matthew Rushing's "Odetta."

Fans of the company will immediately recognize the name of the choreographer. Rushing joined the company as a dancer in 1992 and has left his mark on countless roles with his cool, lyrical, pared-down style and elegantly shaved head. Named rehearsal director and guest artist in 2010, he also has turned his attention to dance-making. "Odetta" is only his third creation for the company, and it's a beauty.

A gorgeous blend of richly expressive movement set to the formidable vocal stylings of Odetta, the late singer dubbed "the voice of the civil rights movement," the work is comprised of 10 memorably theatrical, character-driven sequences that flip from expertly limned comedy to fierce political commentary. Without question, Rushing's work is an instant classic, and might very well become a fresh signature piece that can stand right alongside Alvin Ailey's beloved "Revelations" in its ability to both explore African-American life and connect with a universal audience.

Rushing has strung together 10 songs in very different moods and musical styles. The striving, spiritual nature of the work is established at the start with "This Little Light of Mine" — a swirling solo (danced with fervor at Friday's opening night by company veteran Hope Boykin) that culminates with the full cast of 11.

Designer Travis George's ingenious set pieces — wooden forms rearranged to suggest everything from a church to railroad tracks — are carried in by the dancers, with Dante Baylor's artfully

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

Highly recommended

When: Through March 15

Where: Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress

Tickets: \$32-\$97

Info: (800) 982-2787; AuditoriumTheatre.org

Run time: 2 hours 15 minutes, with two intermissions

patchworked costumes and Andre Vasquez's handsome lighting conjuring a folkloric world. And at times we hear Odetta herself in recordings that captured her thoughts on everything from self-esteem to her feelings about prison songs and work songs.

Belen Pereya led the "Ox Driver Song," and Renaldo Maurice gave a searing rendering of "John Henry," that steel-driving folk hero. For pure comic charm it would be hard to beat "There's a Hole in the Bucket," in which Odetta teamed with Harry Belafonte. Seated on stools, the ideally paired Rachael McLaren (a snappy beauty) and Marcus Jarrell Willis (with his wonderfully malleable facial expressions) generated great laughter as they acted out this song about a demanding woman and her feckless man.

The dancers joined to suggest a train journey to glory in "Motherless Children," before the mood turned more inward with "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," danced with controlled passion by Kanji Segawa. "Cool Water" inspired an exquisite love duet, magnificently danced by the poetic Sarah Daley and Yannick Lebrun.

And then came an unexpected explosion — Odetta's version of the Bob Dylan song "Masters of War" — a riveting anti-war piece (with the fired-up ensemble led by Michael Francis McBride and Danica Paulos) that could easily stand on its own. Sustaining the formidable momentum of that sequence was



The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in a sequence from choreographer Matthew Rushing's "Odetta." | STEVE WILSON

Megan Jakel's rendering of "Glory, Glory." Jakel, with her great mane of red curls, is a sensational dancer whose speed and intensity light up the stage. The ensemble gathered for the finale, "Freedom Trilogy," an Ailey-esque expression of communal uplift. All in all, a knockout.

Where can you go from there? As it happens, Robert Battle, the Ailey's artistic director, is a master of mixing and matching programs. So the next work on the program, "Episodes," was a radical departure — Ulysses Dove's ferociously modern and very urban-feeling work from the late 1980s that explores the competitive, go-for-broke, love-hate elements in erotic/romantic relationships.

This piece for nine dancers (set to a thrilling hammer-and-anvil-like score by Robert Ruggieri) requires a combination of bravura technique involving fiercely complex partnering and killer timing, and scorching emotional connection. The dancers, dressed in sleek black velvet, attacked every high-intensity encounter with razor-sharp precision and attitude, with Friday's ensemble featuring groundbreaking dancing by Kirven Douthitt-Boyd, Sean Arnold Carmon, Jeroboam Boeman, Marcus Jarrell Willis, Renaldo Maurice, Rachael McLaren, Sarah Daley, Megan Jakel and Demetia Hopkins-Greene.

And then, of course, the pro-

gram ended with "Revelations" — perhaps the only work in the world that has the audience in a state of audible exaltation even before the curtain goes up.

Two other programs are being performed during the run, with Program B featuring Hans Van Manen's "Polish Pieces," Asadata Dafora's "Awassa Astrige/Ostrich," Ulysses Dove's "Bad Blood" and "Revelations," and Program C including Ronald K. Brown's "Grace," Hofesh Shechter's "Up-rising," Christopher Wheeldon's "After the Rain" pas de deux and "Revelations."

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