

ARTS & BOOKS

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SPRING ARTS | DANCE



STEVE WILSON/ModernLight303

HOPE BOYKIN, an Ailey veteran, will represent Odetta. Choreographer Matthew Rushing said he wanted Boykin for her "sensitivity as a person with a huge heart."

Timeless and timely

The music and legacy of Odetta Holmes will be honored by Alvin Ailey

By JOSEPH CARMAN

NEW YORK — At the start of "Odetta," dancer Hope Boykin, the warmest of earth mothers and costumed in fire-and-earth tones, skims alone over the stage with an undulating spine and beckoning arms as she punctuates the song, "This Little Light of Mine." In contrast, evoking a visionary partisan, Boykin later rallies an agitated ensemble to Odetta Holmes' cover of Bob Dylan's "Masters of War" as the lyrics hurl their accusations: "You that build the death planes/ You that build the big bombs/ You that hide behind walls/ You that hide behind desks...."

Choreographed by Matthew Rushing, "Odetta" is one of 10 dances to be performed during the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's April engagement at the Music Center. A West Coast premiere, "Odetta," with

a cast of 11 dancers, was commissioned by Ailey artistic director Robert Battle in response to a moving 2009 memorial service for the civil-rights activist anointed "the queen of American folk music" by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and who inspired a range of singers, including Janis Joplin and Joan Baez.

After hearing Maya Angelou's tribute to Odetta, Battle says, "It made me sit up and awake the teacher in me. I thought people need to know about this."

The timeliness of this piece together with another company premiere, "Uprising" by Hofesh Shechter, in an era of racial tension from Ferguson, Mo., to Los Angeles was apparent to Battle, although polemics were not his plan.

As for Odetta, there's the voice itself, which found a home in jazz, blues, spirituals, prison songs and show tunes as well as folk songs and was used as a weapon for change. "I think there is truth in the sound of Odetta's voice that reminds us in some subconscious way of where we come from — although we may not feel that we all come from the same place," he says.

As counterculture figure Wavy Gravy once said, "Her voice could be a great and mighty roar or a sweet and delicate whisper that would not disturb the china. Or she could take out the whole china cabinet."

Born in Birmingham, Ala., Odetta grew up surrounded by the work songs of the Great Depression. She encountered her first brushes with racism early, particularly while traveling to Los Angeles by



DANTE BAYLOR

A COSTUME SKETCH by Dante Baylor for Alvin Ailey's "Odetta."

a train when the conductor removed all the black passengers to another car. After graduating with a degree in music from Los Angeles City College, she landed a job in a traveling production of "Finian's Rainbow." In 1966, she recorded her first solo album, "Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues," which became an instant folk music classic.

Battle chose Rushing, a former company dancer in 1992 and now a guest artist and rehearsal director for the Ailey troupe, as choreographer for his theatrical and technical chops. "Matthew did a piece called 'Uptown,' based on the Harlem Renaissance," says Battle, sitting in his office at the Ailey studios with a commanding view of midtown Manhattan. "What I liked about it was that it was old-fashioned dance-theater, which is the foundation of this company."

Rushing immersed himself in Odetta's music and legacy in African American culture. "Her voice is rich with history, spirit, strength and perseverance," he says. "It transcends race. That's why I feel everybody is attracted to this woman's voice."

He chose 10 songs with spoken quotes from Odetta to act as transitions and to highlight the dynamics and span of her voice. Included in the 40-minute piece, which received mixed reviews at its New York premiere in December, are the prison song "John Henry," the bluesy country song "Cool Water," the whimsical, double entendre-riddled "A Hole in the Bucket" and the spiritual "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child."

"To create the through-line for the work and represent the spirit of Odetta, Rushing recruited Boykin, a 15-year Ailey veteran. Like the textured tone of Odetta's voice, he says, "Hope has that same animalistic quality, but at the same time she can be very beautiful, very soft."

Boykin, whose sturdy physique

prompted some of her early teachers to steer her away from dancing, took her first name to heart and prevailed. ("I am OK with being the poster girl for dancers with unconventional bodies," she has said.) She took her cue to embodying the essence of Odetta from Rushing's measured choreography as well as from the music. "Odetta gave a song to you exactly how she knew you needed to hear it," she says.

During the L.A. visit the troupe will also perform Shechter's in-your-face "Uprising," performed by seven men in street wear to a percussive score by Shechter, a London-based Israeli choreographer, and the British dubstep duo Yex'd, the dance explores male violence and confrontation (including a chokehold) and was triggered in part by the Paris riots of disenfranchised youths in 2006.

Having grown up in Miami's Liberty City neighborhood, Battle knows the images of African American men lurching menacingly toward the audience can make some uncomfortable, even though that wasn't necessarily the choreographer's intention.

"As someone who is African American, when I step onto an elevator and people grasp their purses or a taxirun right past me — I still experience that daily," he says. "It's not lost on me that this piece would have a certain resonance and for some it might be too heavy."

Now that Battle firmly holds the reins of the company after taking over from Ailey superstar Judith Jamison almost four years ago, he has placed his imprint on the direction of the troupe, which was criticized in the past for festuring world-class, heavyweight dancers in lightweight repertoire. Battle has added more heft with company premieres by choreographers such as Jiri Kylián, Paul Taylor, and Christopher Wheeldon.

"You kind of push in a different direction without alienating," says Battle. "Riding that fine line is a challenge — one that keeps me up at night."

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Alvin Ailey Dance Theater

When: April 15 through 19
Where: Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles
Price: \$35 to \$142
Information: (213) 972-0711
www.musiccenter.org