

# The Boston Globe

## An uplifting 'Odetta' from Alvin Ailey

By: Karen Campbell

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We can always count on Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to be lively, colorful, and entertaining. But Thursday's opening night Celebrity Series performance was that and much more, offering Ailey's rousing "Revelations" on a slate with the Boston premiere of Matthew Rushing's stirring new "Odetta" and Israeli-born Hofesh Shechter's provocative "Uprising," which is having its company premiere this season.

In conjunction with the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act, Rushing's new "Odetta" honors the woman Martin Luther King Jr. christened the "Queen of American folk music." Using her burnished, soulful vocals to tell stories of the impoverished, oppressed, and spiritually yearning, Odetta Holmes was not only a hugely influential singer-songwriter but a committed activist, and Rushing's work pays tribute to her life. In addition to recordings of Odetta singing, the work is threaded through with snippets of provocative commentary, like the opening quote from Marianne Williamson — "Our deepest fear is to be powerful beyond measure." The work's only major disappointment was that the score's boomy bass was not attenuated for better clarity, making a lot of the text and lyrics difficult to decipher.

But the familiar songs were lent an extra layer of power and poignance by Rushing's choreography. Hope Boykin is the central figure, opening the work to "This Little Light of Mine" with earthy hip rolls, rippling torso, and undulating arms that beckon the ensemble to gather in community. In some sections, the movement mimics the words, such as the stomping feet and whip-like arms of "Ox Driver Song" and the totally charming enactment of "There's a Hole in the Bucket." As Eliza and Henry, a stern Rachael McLaren and a rubbery-faced Marcus Jarrell Willis grapple with the unfortunate dilemma of the title.

Other times, the movement is more abstractly evocative. Renaldo Maurice tempers the strength and vigor of “John Henry” with loose-jointed isolations. “Cool Water” is set as a lush duet of intricate couplings and fluid shapes. Megan Jakel punctuates the slow, elegiac “Burden” with frenetic runs and blistering spins, arms flailing as if trying to cast off demons. “Freedom Trilogy” evokes the perils of war, but a jubilant ensemble dance ends the work with uplifting energy.

Shechter’s 2006 “Uprising” offers a very different kind of protest. The 38-year-old London-based choreographer has become one of the hottest stars in Europe, and it’s not surprising given the visceral punch of this dance, considered by many as his breakout work. This is perhaps the edgiest choreography the Ailey troupe has tackled yet.

“Uprising” suggests the quickly shifting dynamics and tribal mentality, like that of factories or prisons, among a group of seven men. In fact, the percussive electronic score by Shechter and Vex’d recalls the thundering of some infernal machine. Lee Curran’s lighting is dim and smoky, and the men emerge from the darkness in a single confrontational line. Their subsequent interactions range from tender to combative. One moment, they embrace, support. The next, they are sucked into a tussle, smacking one another, grappling for power. Stillness explodes into activity — they tumble and roll, slither and crawl, skitter across the stage. Low weighted walks erupt into kicks and runs. In one memorable sequence, they simply melt to the floor. “Uprising” is episodic and overly long, raw and a little messy. But while it may be hard to love, it’s impossible to look away.

A tradition for more than four decades, the company’s opening night finale was an outstanding performance of Ailey’s brilliant signature piece, “Revelations,” including the most stirring rendition in memory of “Fix Me, Jesus” – Linda Celeste Sims and Glenn Allen Sims were exquisite. While I’d like to see programming for the occasion break stride with a more adventurous capper, Boston audiences apparently clamor to see this one time after time. And it’s hard to argue with a masterpiece bordering on perfection.

Citi Wang Theatre, 800-982-2787

Closing date: through Sunday

Ticket price:\$35-\$105

Company website: <http://www.celebrityseries.org>