

## Moses' debut with Alvin Ailey Dance something to be relished

April 23, 2015

By Allan Ulrich



The **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater** has been making annual visits to UC-Berkeley since 1968, first under its founder and then after his death in 1989, under his successor, **Judith Jamison**, and since 2011, under former dancer, **Robert Battle**. For the past quarter century, the same question has been irresistible: When will the Ailey company deliver the choreography of stature to match the splendid level of its dancing?

That question persisted Tuesday evening at Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall, where the troupe's Cal Performances run opened with a crowd-pleasing collection of dances. But on Wednesday night, in a much more substantial program, **Robert Moses**, the San Francisco-based choreographer, debuted with AAADT the finest commission we've seen in Battle's four-year tenure.

Meaty is a suitable description for Moses' "The Pleasure of the Lesson," a piece that unites five couples in a steamy orange environment, traversing the stage to a score by Moses and local composer **David Worm**. It includes rumbles, beating heart, insistent percussion and quotes from Shakespeare and could be about anything. So could the choreography.

But that's the beauty of the piece. Moses serves up elegant evidence, spurns easy solutions and then invites you to take away any meaning you wish. What the choreography does suggest is the complexity and volatility of relationship between the genders and the speed with which the dominant role can shift. That keeps happening all the way through the grueling final duet, even through the exit, dispatched heroically by **Jacqueline Green** and **Antonio Douthit-Boyd**.

At the start, Moses lines up his superb dancers clad in orange and red as if he were launching a tournament. Stylistically, he incorporates elements of ballet, modern and African dance, and that polyglot style keeps us alert. The duets are fraught with sudden lifts and supports and they keep us off balance. The texture is often as thick as the stage smoke. Structurally, "The Pleasure of the Lesson" adds up to a succession of terrific moments. And for once, it's both rare and thrilling to experience an AAADT work in which the applause-wringing "wow" factor is kept to a minimum.

"The Pleasure of the Lesson" is Moses' first commission for a national company. It won't be the last,

The program's other novelty is the disarming four-minute solo, "Awassa Astrige/Ostrich," made in 1932 by the Sierra Leone-born choreographer **Asadata Dafora** and recreated by **Charles Moore**. Accompanied by a flute-percussion score, and dressed in a feathery skirt, **Jamar Roberts** incarnated the bird of the title, muscles rippling and head jerking with ornithological glee. This is a bit of dance history nobody should miss.

Aside from Ailey's imperishable and eternally wonderful "Revelations," little in Tuesday's program aspired to a more profound structural or emotional approach to movement. The challenges were mostly physical and the audience seemed to adore every feat.

A dance like Matthew Rushing's new "Odetta" was made for adoration. The company's much prized former principal assembled 10 recordings by the esteemed singer, **Odetta Holmes**, all interpreted by a moderate sized ensemble led by the ever-feisty **Hope Boykin**, an energy source whenever she appears.

Rushing honors Odetta both as stirring musician and political activist with minimal scenic design. It all makes for agreeable viewing, but Rushing has pegged the choreography to illustrate the music, rather than fusing with his sound source, and at 40 minutes, "Odetta" seems perilously extended; an "Odetta Suite" might have made more sense.

But even illustration can make its points. I will admit to relishing **Rachael McLaren** playing with **Marcus Jarrell Willis** in their visualization of the duet, "There's a Hole in the Bucket." And the ironic tone of "Freedom Suite" (cannon fodder marching to war) is a sobering climax.

It was hard to understand why Battle would revive Ulysses Dove's 1984 "Bad Blood" with its fierce duets and **Laurie Anderson-Peter Gabriel** score. After a bit, Dove's restricted vocabulary — clenched, raised fists, twirling dancers, running leaps into waiting arms — seems less than innovative. **Linda Celeste Sims** and Jamar Roberts fused physicality and daring in the first duet.

Then, **Kirven Douthit-Boyd** leapt through **David Parsons'** strobe light solo, "Caught," which garnered the predictable ovation.

*Allan Ulrich is the San Francisco Chronicle's dance correspondent*

**Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater:** Through Sunday, April 26, Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley. \$40-\$65. (510) 642-9988, [www.calperformances.org](http://www.calperformances.org).

Photo: Paul Kolnik