

TOWN&COUNTRY

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At Last Night's Ailey Gala

Dancing What Cannot Be Easily Spoken

By Ben Howe



Last night's opening gala benefit for of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater conjured decidedly mixed feelings. On one hand, the event raised \$4.6 million, capping off a \$47 million haul for the year. On the other, it was the last gala the organization will see with powerhouse philanthropist Joan Weill as its board chairman: this fall, after twenty years as a trustee, Weill stepped down, having bolstered the dance troupe in ways all but a few artistic foundations can dream.

More immediately, just a few blocks from the City Center, where the gala was held, protests against the Eric Garner case were building by the minute. Only hours earlier, news had spread that no indictment would be issued against the police officer who choked Mr. Garner to death last summer on Staten Island. For Ailey, as not just a cultural organization but one of the city's elite African-American institutions, it was impossible to block out the anger and despair spreading across the city.

"It is so important for me to be here on this night," declared Jeffrey Wright, one the event's honorary chairs, adroitly sidestepping any direct mentioning of politics, while leaving no attentive listener unclear as to what he was really talking about. Calling the Ailey legacy the voice of a community "too often misunderstood," the Tony-winner observed that "on some deep level, we know that we dance because life dances, because the universe itself is a dance . . . Like life, we too are forever unfolding, always on the cusp of becoming, and often moved to dance what cannot easily be spoken."

Other speakers included Judith Jamison, Ailey's successor as artistic director, who thanked Weill for "dragging" her husband Sandy (former chief executive and chairman of Citigroup) to dance recitals. "Thank you Sandy for your deep pockets," she added. "You're not supposed to say that, but I just did."

Performances of *Uprising* (2006), by Israeli-born choreographer Hofesh Shechter, and *Unfold* (2005), by Robert Battle, Ailey's current artistic director, soon followed. However, it was a staging of *Revelations*, the signature work of Alvin Ailey himself, with its incantatory, harrowing refrain of "Fix me, Jesus," and sorrowful but ultimately triumphant vision of the African-American experience that left the crowd somehow roaring and speechless at the same time.