

DANCE REVIEW

Powerful shows from Ailey troupe

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Ever since Miami-raised Robert Battle became artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the company has been embraced here not just with enthusiasm, but with pride. That sense of ownership was amplified at the troupe's Thursday opening at the Adrienne Arsht Center, which co-sponsored the first dance Battle has made for the Ailey company since he took charge in 2011.

"When your son comes back home, you give him the key to the house," Miami City Commissioner Ken Russell said in a pre-show ceremony at the Ziff Ballet Opera House, as he presented Battle with the key to the city.

"I lose keys a lot, but I don't think I get a do over

with this one," Battle said. "It is wonderful to be home."

That Battle's real home these days is the Ailey troupe, however, was evident in his potent new piece, *Awakening*, and in one of the best programs the company has done since it began performing here regularly in 2009. The dancers' unity, focus and energy seemed to reflect a new company esprit.

Awakening walks a fine line between overwhelming and powerful. It succeeds through its highly structured, yet organic, massively sculptural composition; and its unity with John Mackey's thundering score and Al Crawford's stunning lighting and stage design. And via the ferocious commitment of the 12 dancers, led by the heroic Jamar Roberts.

There's something of *Rite of Spring* in *Awakening*, with

Roberts the figure exalted and sacrificed by the group. Yet, as in other Battle dances, he also struggles internally. The piece opens with a deafening blast of horns and drums, as the dancers, in Jon Taylor's loose white pants and tops, race through as if flung by a cosmic game of crack-the-whip, and huddle together fearfully, as if overwhelmed by unknown forces. Crawford's stark white lighting is made harsher by an inky black backdrop. The dancers seem suspended in dark emptiness, dreamers in a collective nightmare, or prisoners in a sci-fi penitentiary.

Roberts gradually emerges from the group. He stares into the wings as the others hunker down, reaches outward to pull them from their frightened knot. Curled up on the floor under a single spot-

If you go

What: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

When: 2 p.m. Sunday ('Open Door,' 'Awakening,' 'Case of You,' 'Revelations')

Where: Adrienne Arsht Center, 1300 Biscayne Blvd., Miami

Info: \$25 to \$120, arshtcenter.org or 305-949-6722

light, he arches convulsively, unfurls into slow, lunging reaches. Already statuesque, he seems gigantic, luminous with power. His awakening is reflected in the blackness behind: a bar of white light opening like dawn on the horizon, scattered gleaming points like stars. Roberts energizes the others, but only to jagged, robotic energy. At the end, he's pulled down again, electrified and consumed in a way that feels simultaneously exhilarating and

terrifying.

In contrast, the evening's other new work, Ronald K. Brown's *Open Door*, was a joyful celebration. A regal Linda Celeste Sims, whose arching back and encircling arms seem to scoop up the world, and the warmly commanding Matthew Rushing led eight dancers to richly layered Afro-Cuban jazz music from Arturo O'Farrill and his orchestra. (Both Sims and Rushing are mature dancers, and it's marvelous to see their depth showcased here.) *Open Door* was full of Cuban dance elements: defiant gestures from dances to Santeria deities like Ogun and Changó, an extra sinuousness in the hips, an electric rumba type dance from Belen Pereyra and Daniel Harder. The dancers take to it with gusto, moving with a fluidity that feels new for them. Roberts stood out again in a leaping, panther like solo, startling in his combination of power and lightness.

Pas de deux to pop songs can often be sentimental

and clichéd. Thankfully, however, former Ailey artistic director Judith Jamison's *A Case of You*, to Diana Krall's rendition of the Judy Collins song, was neither. Instead it was a sometimes startling, inventive and eclectically intimate dance, with Rachael McLaren and Yannick Lebrun giving a vivid, nuanced performance marked by an almost palpable chemistry.

Revelations was slightly marred by what appeared to be a silent set of speakers on one side. But the dancers made up for it with their passion and commitment. Particularly striking were Sims and her husband Glenn Allen Sims' deep, prayerful immersion in the *Fix Me, Jesus* duet, and Roberts in the yearning *I Wanna Be Ready* solo. Also raised in Miami, the already spectacular Roberts has returned from an injury with a new gravity, penetration and power that could make him one of the company's greatest dancers.