

Alvin Ailey's mix of old, new keeps magic alive



HEDY WEISS

During the course of its nearly six decades as a cultural phenomenon, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has created a unique and enduring bond with its audiences. And when the company arrives for its annual Chicago engagement something else pops into place: The Auditorium Theatre instantly becomes the most racially mixed place in a city that can still be divided.

Tuesday's opening night performance featured one of three different programs to be presented during the company's run here, with all drawing to a celebratory close with Ailey's "Revelations," a work that has audiences applauding from the moment it hears the opening chords of "I Been 'Buked," to the fan-waving finale of "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham."

But there was much more on the bill that proved electrifying, most notably artistic director Robert Battle's "Awakening," the first work he created for the company since becoming its artistic director in 2011. A true stunner, it is a fascinating mix of the Ailey inheritance and Battle's own bravura theatricality driven by his ability to conjure rituals made modern.

Set to a thunderous, altogether thrilling score by John Mackey, "Awakening" might best be described as "The Rite of Spring" meets a latter-day vision of End



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Robert Battle's "Awakening." | PAUL KOLNIK

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

Highly recommended

When: Through March 13

Where: Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress

Tickets: \$33-\$123

Info: (312) 341-2300; auditoriumtheatre.org

Run time: 2 hours 10 minutes, with two intermissions

Days. Its 12 dancers, dressed in loose, white, pajama-like costumes by Jon Taylor, arrive to the sound of wildly warped brass that suggests a herd of elephants run amok. Unquestionably there is a cataclysmic disturbance in the air as the dancers swirl frenziedly — gathering into a tight huddle at some moments, as if seeking a zone of collective safety, and then circling out like a flock of birds stunned by gunshots or a bomb. Breathtaking from start to finish.

Also new to Chicago

audiences was "Open Door," Ronald K. Brown's gorgeously fluid, sensual work with a Latin beat (set to the music of Luis Demetrio, Arturo O'Farrill and Tito Puente), with Keiko Voltaire's beautifully hued, gossamer costumes moving with the same sensual flow as the 10 dancers' amazing arms, hips and backs. A subtle study of relationships, it begins with a male solo (danced by the company's invaluable "poet," Matthew Rushing), followed by a female solo (veteran dancer Linda Celeste Sims in her usual superb form). It then moves into a more social ballroom-like world conjoining the energy of five couples.

"Love Songs," an Ailey classic from 1972, features a single dancer (the intensely focused Glenn Allen Sims) conjuring three episodes in a man's life. It begins with Donny Hathaway's rendering of "A Song for You," moves on to Nina Simone's haunting take on "Poppies," and finally suggests the need

to carry via Hathaway's "He Ain't Heavy He's My Brother."

In "Revelations," Linda Celeste Sims and Glenn Allen Sims gave a breathtaking performance of "Fix Me, Jesus." Demetia Hopkins-Greene brought special zest to "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel." Ghrai DeVore, Renaldo Maurice and Jacqueline Green brought a winning sense of celebration to "Wade in the Water." Vernard J. Gilmore was a model of artful control in "I Wanna Be Ready." And Samuel Lee Roberts, Yannick Lebrun and Michael Francis McBride tore through "Sinner Man."

NOTE: "Program B" includes Rennie Harris' "Exodus" and Battle's "No Longer Silent," and "C" features Ailey's "Blues Suite" and "Cry," plus Paul Taylor's "Piazzolla Caldera."

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