DANCE REVIEW

A new day dawns for Ailey

By Allan Ulrich

March 29, at UC’s Zellerbach Hall. That is the first dance Battle has made for the company since he became artistic director five years ago may have something to do with it.

There seems a message here: The company could prosper with its panoply of superlatively danced applause machines (such as Ronald K. Brown’s “Open Door”), but the troupe’s audiences might be seduced by something different. When the 12 dances, all in Jon Taylor’s white jerseys and trousers, are swept onset and off as though blown by hurricane winds, and John Mackey’s score whoops in your ear, you sense ritual in the air. These creatures roll, crawl and spin. They form patterns and one, Jamar Roberts, falls out. A circle of dancers surrounds him, and an enigmatic ending brings you up short.

They could be robots and a lone outliner. They could be inmates of an institution and an individual who has regained his sanity. And Battle admits a kinship with “Le sacre du printemps,” but he possesses an original eye for patterning that could lead to great pieces, and he certainly is on the way here. The dancers huddle in masses, which dissolve before your eyes. There’s a lyrical section that seems to mark time, but “Awakening,” in its West Coast premiere, seemed full of promise. Al Crawford’s lighting deserves a mention.

This first of three Cal Performances programs by the Alvin Ailey troupe was unique in featuring dances by all three of its artistic directors. Judith Jamison’s “A Case of You” (2004) is a stunning duet, set to Diana Krall’s recordings of three Billie Holiday songs. When Jacqueline Green and the inexhaustible Roberts enter, unpredictability reigns. The pair toy with a red scarf, but from then on, we get a case of mutual attraction-repulsion working itself out. At one point, Green seemed to run up Roberts’ standing leg and you wonder how she did it. Roberts remains the company’s paragon of rugged lyricism. Green’s toughness and vulnerability lingered in the mind.

The remainder of this program offered less satisfaction for veteran watchers of the troupe. Brown’s “Open Door” came as one of the season’s greater disappointments. In his previous works for the company, the choreographer took us on spiritual journeys, which at their best (“Grace”) were transcendent expressions of religious belief.

None of that in “Open Door,” a pedigreed and interchangeable suite of salsa dancing for 10 sleek performers headed by the ageless Matthew Rushing and the classy Linda Celeste Sims. The recorded score by Arturo O’Farrill and the Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra heralds lots of jutting arns, flouncing skirts and snazzy looks. Roberts, Hope Boykin, Daniel Harder and Brebrandi Belen Pereyra helped to pass the time.

Ailey’s “Revelations” (1960) closed the program as it does most of the company’s evenings. The choreographer’s memory of religious belief in his Texas boyhood will endure, but not because of what I saw Tuesday. Some of it approached the best, notably “Fix Me, Jesus” duet in an intense rendering by Linda Celeste Sims and Glenn Allen Sims. Yet, the ensembles, Ailey’s greatest inspiration, lacked spark and spontaneity.

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