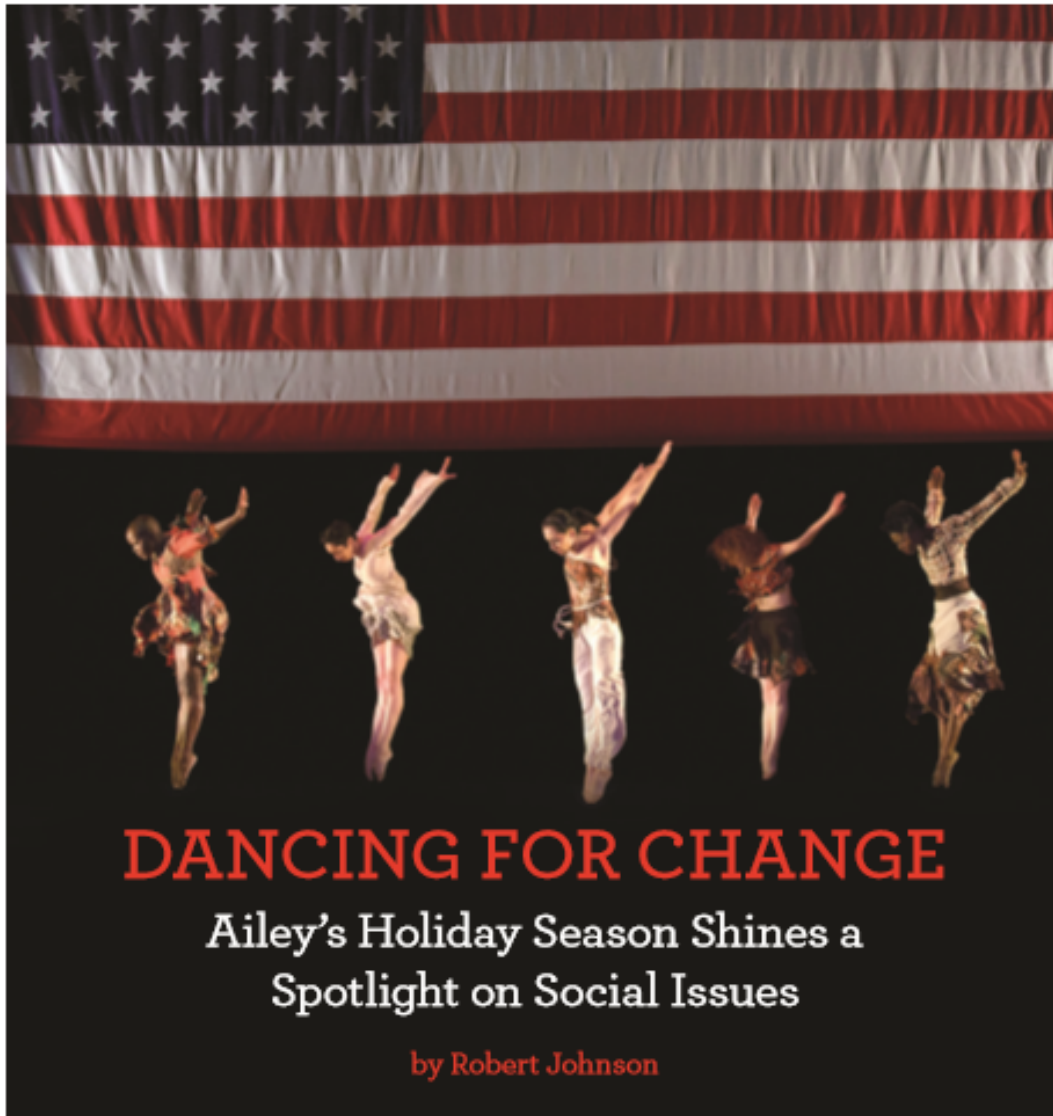


# PLAYBILL

November 2016



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Matthew Rushing's *ODETTA*; photo by Paul Kolnik

"Believing firmly that through dance one can change minds or uplift—not just entertain, but also educate—seems to me to be the backbone of the company," says Robert Battle, the Artistic Director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. In the wake of a traumatizing year in American life, Battle feels that the time is right for the Company to once again step into the fray of current events. This year, Ailey's annual holiday season at New York City Center shines a brilliant light on a variety of important issues, from Apartheid to police brutality to the powerful legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

For all that we've seen this year, there have been even more terrible things we didn't see. Those things remain invisible because they took place inside our bursting prison system, where as many as a million African-Americans are once again enslaved, with imprisonment turning friends and family members into ghosts.

The celebrated choreographer Kyle Abraham grapples with that poignant physical absence in *Untitled America*, a three-part dance suite that feels more and more like a hurricane coming to blow the roof off City Center. Abraham's dance, which has taken a year to gestate and is created with

the support of commissioning funds from City Center, has emerged in installments but will at last be seen in its entirety this season.

*Untitled America* could not be more topical in the wake of the 2016 presidential contest and Ava DuVernay's acclaimed documentary *13th*, which have placed the cradle-to-prison pipeline firmly in the public eye. However, Abraham's work about mass incarceration and its effect on the American family was initially inspired by his own family's experience, and by Claude Brown's autobiographical novel *Manchild in the Promised Land*.

Another year pock-marked by gunfire and police killings impacted the dance as well, as Abraham continued to choreograph new material and re-arrange movement. Black Lives Matter marched; and NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick knelt in protest during the National Anthem. Watching it all, Abraham says, "The first day working on the third movement, I said to everybody, 'You know, guys, we need to take a second and process

all that's happening right now.'" Abraham played interviews with prison inmates for the Ailey dancers, who sometimes left rehearsal in tears. Those interviews will be heard in the score for *Untitled America*, blended with music by Laura Mvula, Steven Brown, and Raime.

No one should be surprised to see contemporary social problems addressed in dance. The Ailey company has had what might be called a social-justice agenda since its inception in 1958, a few years before the Civil Rights movement shook the nation.

"Alvin Ailey didn't see the images he wanted to see, and the stories of his people that he wanted to see in the concert

dance world," explains Battle. "We weren't well represented." Battle emphasizes that modern dance is "not only about being seen, but also about being heard. We're thinking a lot now about Millennials, and making sure that the audience continues to grow and evolve."

He points out that some young people may question whether concert dance has anything to do with what's going on in the world, or in their lives. To them, especially, he says, "It absolutely should and does. That's extremely important to me."

And, in fact, the Ailey repertoire contains a number of politically-charged pieces, from Donald McKayle's *Rainbow Round My Shoulder* (about the dreams of men on

**"Modern dance is not only about being seen, but also about being heard."**

**– Robert Battle**



Samantha Figgins in Kyle Abraham's *Untitled America*; photo by Paul Kolnik



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Kyle Abraham's *Untitled America*; photo by Paul Kolnik



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Rennie Harris' *Exodus*; photo by Paul Kolnik

a chain gang) to more recent creations like Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's *Shelter*; Matthew Rushing's *ODETTA*; and Rennie Harris' *Exodus*. Another classic returning this season in a new production, Ailey's own *Masekela Langage*, draws a connection between the violence of Apartheid and race riots in the United States.

Despite the success such dances have achieved, American remains a country where making explicitly political theater sometimes has a cost. Perhaps, as French writer Jean Cocteau once put it, tact in art consists of "knowing how far we may go too far."

Battle admits as much. "There are, perhaps, works that I would shy away from because of their bluntness," he says. "Not because I don't like that kind of bluntness, but I don't necessarily feel it would be right for the company. You have to consider if the message falls in line with the company's mission in a way that's responsible."

Yet Battle, who knew what he was get-

ting into when he invited Abraham to create *Untitled America*, is confident that his dancers have earned the right to take risks. "I feel that people—presenters, audiences—trust the company so much that they're willing to go with it," he says. "I try to [find] choreographers who are able to get their message across without beating somebody over the head. That's what Alvin Ailey was able to do brilliantly. Nobody looks at *Cry*, which he dedicated to black women everywhere, especially our mothers, and thinks, 'Oh, but what about white women?'"

To Battle, an artist's craft remains as important as his or her message; he praises what he calls "the luxury of ambiguity," which allows a dance to resonate without causing offense. Abraham tends to agree. "I'm not scared of being too confrontational," says the choreographer. "I'm more afraid of being too literal. It defeats the purpose if you're just going to spell everything out. It's one thing to say something, but it's another thing to make it hit home,



and that's where the artistry lies."

While Abraham takes on mass incarceration, Hope Boykin's world premiere *r-Evolution, Dream* addresses privilege and the friction between classes. The idea came to Boykin, an Ailey Company member, while she was visiting the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, a museum in Atlanta. She became enthralled listening to a recording of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivering his final sermon, "The Drum Major Instinct."

"Dr. King's message was really prophetic," Boykin says, "meaning that he was dealing with something at that particular time, but if you listen to his words, we're still dealing with those things." What touched her most, she says, was Dr. King's emphasis on love and generosity.

Boykin's large cast, which incorporates

young dancers from Ailey II, is split into four groups identified by the color of their costumes. *r-Evolution, Dream* features a soundtrack with music by Boykin's old friend Ali Jackson—a renowned percussionist in the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra—and text she has written, narrated by erstwhile *Hamilton* star Leslie Odom, Jr.

– Hope Boykin  
All the characters in the piece are based upon real people Boykin has known—including her great-grandmother and her mother—giving the work a personal dimension. "I think we all are political in everything we do," Boykin says, "because there's politics at work and politics at the grocery store." Yet, she adds, "I don't believe this work is heavy. I just think it's relevant."

Robert Johnson is a freelance dance writer. You can follow him on Twitter (@RobertJ26215165).



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Alvin Ailey's *Masekela Langage*; photo by Paul Kolnik