

Pure, thrilling poetry in motion

Dance

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Sadler's Wells, London EC1

By Mark Monahan

Of all the troupes who from time to time visit these shores, I'm not sure any is more consistently welcome or rewarding than Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Formed in New York in 1958 by their namesake to give black American dancers a "voice", this resplendent ensemble is back in England for the first time in four years, following a brief sojourn at the Edinburgh International Festival. On offer during their 12-day stay at Sadler's Wells are a full four programmes of works, of which Tuesday's, Contemporary Voices, was the first. And, not for the first time, they royally brought the house down.

Featuring four pieces by three African-Americans, the evening launches with 2022's *Are You in Your Feelings?*, by Kyle Abraham. It plays out to a magpie collection of soul, hip hop and R&B songs by

PAUL KOLNIK



Jump to it: the Alvin Ailey company perform *Are You in Your Feelings?*

everyone from Lauryn Hill to Drake to Erykah Badu, but like so many pieces of recent decades, it otherwise comes across as a contemporary descendent of another East Coast creation, Jerome Robbins's 1969 neo-classical masterpiece *Dances at a Gathering*.

Like *Dances*, this complex, pacy, barefoot study in conviviality has couples and ensembles come and go, relationships and romances coalesce and splinter, all building to a gently exultant climax. The steps have flourishes that owe something to both hip hop and Ailey himself.

The performers' easy athleticism, passionate musicality and liquid upper-body lyricism are just marvellous and come across as at once perfectly fastidious and entirely spontaneous. Only an absolute rotter would single out just one of them for special praise – but I doubt 2023 will see a more energised, expressive or exciting dancer than Ashley Kaylynn Green grace a British stage.

Also on offer are two short UK premieres by AAADT's artistic director, Robert Battle. The quartet *For Four* (2021) is a campily enjoyable response to Wynton Marsalis's furious jazz rhythms that the quartet of dancers attack as if let off an invisible leash (aptly so for a piece conceived during lockdown), while *Unfold* is a curious, contrastingly measured romantic duet to Charpentier that Ashley Mayeux and Jeroboam Bozeman whole-heartedly embraced on opening night.

As nearly always with AAADT, the evening wraps with its company's 1960 signature piece, Ailey's autobiographical study in agony and ecstasy, *Revelations*. That the company can still make it feel so vital and affecting after so many thousands of performances is a credit to all involved – not least the late, great Ailey himself.

In rep until Sept 16. Tickets: 020 7863 8000; [sadlerswells.com](https://www.sadlerswells.com)