

# San Francisco Chronicle

[Review: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's spirit shines on as company searches for new artistic director](#)

By: Rachel Howard  
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Zellerbach Hall was packed and spirits were high for opening night of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's 56th visit to Berkeley. But someone important was missing.

Robert Battle, the artistic director who tended Alvin Ailey's legacy while expanding the East Coast company's repertory in slyly inspired directions, resigned suddenly last November due to health concerns. Battle's gregarious presence was deeply missed for the launch of Cal Performances' Ailey Week on Tuesday, April 2, but his influence was profoundly felt.

This was particularly true in the evening's big hit: Hans van Manen's *Solo*.

Van Manen is Dutch and *Solo* was created in 1997 for the coolly avant-garde Nederlands Dans Theater. In the United States, it is usually performed by ballet companies, including San Francisco Ballet. Why shouldn't the Ailey company dance it, too?

On Tuesday, three extraordinary Ailey dancers delivered it more thrillingly than I have ever seen across the bay at the War Memorial Opera House. Yannick Lebrun whirled through windmill-arm turns and then pranced and shrugged, jester-like; Patrick Coker stopped on the proverbial dime and kicked his flexed foot to strut away, so virtuosically the audience exploded in laughter. Most memorable of the three stars (yes, this "solo" is actually a triple showdown), Chalvar Monteiro sashayed while looking back over his shoulder, then darted in jetés so razor sharp they practically gleamed. And don't forget to note that textbook-worthy turnout of his pirouettes.

The brilliance of *Solo* is in its combination of spare music (a Bach violin partita), minimalist costumes and simple humor, which Ailey's dancers handled with a refreshing freedom of personality. The brilliance of Battle, personally selected by Ailey muse Judith Jamison to be the troupe's third artistic leader, was to choose works that perfectly connected with and enlarged the company's formidably adaptable technique.

A very different craft marked *Me, Myself, and You*, a duet by former Ailey member and Ballet Philippines dancer Elizabeth Roxas-Dobrish, and one of the recent premieres the company has brought from its New York home season.

Dancer Caroline T. Dartney trained in rhythmic gymnastics before coming to the Ailey School, but in this duet she also seems to have mastered trapeze arts, flying into a jump and catching James Gilmer's arm mid-air, the velocity swinging her to the floor.

The scene was set to Duke Ellington's "In a Sentimental Mood" in a stunning operatic recording by contemporary soprano Brandie Sutton. In a silver robe, Dartney approached a mirror, through which the majestically tall and tender Gilmer stepped like an apparition from her past. Roxas-Dobrish will surely make even more original works in her unfolding career, but if this one contained a few predictable dance images, it was nonetheless emotionally true.



The evening's slate of dances was the first of five programs — all but one end with Ailey's 1960 classic *Revelations* — that run through Sunday, April 7. Three of the programs begin with Bay Area choreographer Alonzo King's luscious masterpiece *Following the Subtle Current Upstream* in a new production. But Tuesday launched with Ronald K. Brown's *Dancing Spirit*,



and it was both infectiously groove-driven and peculiarly reassuring at a time when the company is searching for its next leader.

Created as a birthday present to artistic director emeritus Jamison in 2009, *Dancing Spirit* featured the equally energetic and elegant Hannah Alissa Richardson in a long white costume pointedly similar to the dress Jamison wore for her famous solo *Cry* in 1971. Ensemble processions that start with recognizable Ailey poses and gestures lead to the earthy West African-influenced stomps and hip-swags Brown is known for. All of this is part of the stream of history, the dance seems to say, implying that while new rivulets of influence will join the river, Alvin

Ailey's spirit will never stop coursing through his company.

And what about "Revelations," the eternal Ailey dance that undergirds it all? It's fashionable among certain critics to call this bedrock arrangement of spirituals "over-performed." An awe-struck audience at Zellerbach begged to differ. More importantly, so did the dancers, who performed it with undiminished power.

Lebrun levitated and collapsed with exquisite sensitivity in "I Want to Be Ready." Monteiro, Xavier Mack, and Christopher R. Wilson lit "Sinner Man" on fire. After the traditional "Rocka My Soul" encore, the cheers carried on.



Heads up: On Thursday, April 4, for Ailey Week's gala night, the company will dance *Revelations* with a 23-member live choir. The ovation is sure to be larger than life — and one I hope Battle hears even miles away. What a gift his leadership has given us.