



Guards and prisoners both: Dancers in Kyle Abraham's *Untitled America*

Paul Kolnik

▼ Dance

Promised Lands

Four different dances explore places of pleasure and pain

BY ELIZABETH ZIMMER

The formidable Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater closes its spring season at Lincoln Center this week with a challenging “21st Century Voices” bill that features new and recent work by four African-American choreographers, all mid-career award-winners deserving of the exposure.

The program opens with Brooklynite Ronald K. Brown’s 2015 *Open Door*, set to recordings by Arturo O’Farrill and the Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra. The most traditionally musical piece on the bill, it salutes the normalization of U.S. relations with Cuba, drawing inspiration from

and are apparently under surveillance: Recorded testimony, gleaned from prison telephone calls, is barely audible through the percussion of musical duo Raime’s industrial electronic score. “I can’t change the past,” murmurs one voice. “I want to go home,” cries another. The curtain descends very slowly on their hopelessness.

Darker still is *No Longer Silent*, a piece originally made in 2007 by Robert Battle, now Ailey’s artistic director, for students at Juilliard. The fraught symphonic score by Erwin Schulhoff, a Jewish composer who perished in a concentration camp in 1942, mobilizes eighteen dancers in steps reminiscent of the early, socially conscious work of Martha Graham. Barefoot in black suits with white kneepads, before a long metal bench and under fuchsia light, they seem at once frantic and funereal, the portentous choreography sweeping them back and forth like hapless prisoners or the armies that overran Europe during two world wars.

Rennie Harris, a hip-hop pioneer from Philadelphia and at 52 the oldest of these four choreographers, offers *Exodus*, in which sixteen dancers in casual gear and sneakers rise from a bivouac on the stage

Brown's travels to the island and spotlighting ten Ailey performers in salsa-flavored diversions. They're led affectionately by guest artist (and rehearsal director) Matthew Rushing and the current senior member of the troupe, Linda Celeste Sims, celebrating her twentieth year and looking beautiful in a backless dress. As the music shifts from bluesy solo piano to full Latin orchestration, more dancers join in, swirling and preening, bringing a sweet social occasion up to party speed. (Brown's own troupe, Evidence, brings more of his work to the Joyce June 28–July 3.)

The evening darkens as it proceeds, beginning with the new second movement of Kyle Abraham's *Untitled America*, a trilogy-in-progress that explores the impact of incarceration on the African-American community. Plaintive fragments of gospel song and conversation float above a somber tableau of three men and four women alternately functioning as guards and prisoners — taking one another down and then lifting each other up, their hands held as if bound behind their backs. They wear gray vests over bare skin

floor, bathed in foggy light. Gradually, to strains of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and a collage of house music, they are transformed into majestic, kinetic figures, dressed in white. Watching the Ailey dancers, masters of modern technique, executing the complex poly-rhythms of hip-hop — playing with time as well as space, taking body parts in different directions at different speeds — is a revelation.

Four more-varied works could hardly be imagined. One pleasure of this season, which unfurls in the wide-open Koch Center auditorium, is the diversity of the audience — multiracial, intergenerational, eager to cheer and applaud. None of these dances is a world-beater, but the mere fact that each holds a spot in the company's repertoire is cause for congratulation.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

*David H. Koch Theater
20 Lincoln Center Plaza
212-496-0600, alvinailey.org
Through June 19*

Online and included in Village Voice Newsletter: <http://www.villagevoice.com/arts/promised-lands-four-different-dances-explore-places-of-pleasure-and-pain-8733282>