DANCE

An iconic black troupe keeps wrestling with race

BY JORDAN LEVIN
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Robert Battle, artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, was prepping for an interview a few years ago and figured that, as head of a storied African-American troupe, he’d be asked yet again about black dance. So he called longtime mentor Carolyn Adams, one of modern dance’s few black performers during her time with the Paul Taylor Dance Company.

“We said no one ever says, ‘Have you seen any white dance lately?’” says Battle. “We laughed, because it is kind of ridiculous. But it’s the same way I feel about Black History Month.

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Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater’s Chalvar Monteiro, Ghrai Devore, and Jamar Roberts in Kyle Abraham’s ‘Untitled America.’
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On the one hand I celebrate it, and on the other hand you’re reminded that you still need to have a single month in the year for black history. The question of what it means to be a black dance company is newly relevant for the Aliley troope, which makes its annual stop at the Adrienne Arsht Center Thursday through Sunday. Since choreographer Alvin Alley launched his New York-based company in the heat of the civil rights movement in 1958, its popularity and success have made it an emblem of African-American achievement, and of how far this country had come on race. President Barack Obama’s family often attended the troope’s shows in Washington. Performances of Alley’s beloved “Revelations” seem to celebrate rather than a necessary manifestation of black humanity.

But more recently, the Black Lives Matter movement, debates over incarceration, racial-identity, police brutality, and what many see as the legacy of the rhetoric during President Donald Trump’s campaign and in his administration, have made race a fraught and current issue again. For Battle and the Alley troope, the shift raises a number of questions. Do they have a renewed responsibility to present dances that address rights and black identity? Do they simply do the best work they can, with the idea that speaks for itself? How much should the company continue to be shaped by being a black dance troope?

“Some of the concerns,” admits Battle, who was raised in Miami’s Liberty City and went to Northwestern Senior High School and the New World School of the Arts, has a responsibility to shine a light on some of those issues, because of what the company represents. We have to find ways to hold a mirror to society. But I also feel strongly that each individual should be able to make the work they want.”

The company’s Miami shows represent a range of responses. They include Swedish choreographer Knut Ulven’s “Walking Mad,” set to Ravel’s “Boléro,” in which a wall on stage represents relationship barriers; and Italian ballet maker Massimo Testino’s “Choreography of a Man,” with music by French-Cuban world music darlings Beyoncé.

Those choices stem from Battle’s effort to show the troupe has as much right to sleek, ballet-infused postmodernism as anyone, inspired partly by a youth in which he learned to love Chopin and Ella Fitzgerald, Shakespeare and Maya Angelou. (Battle’s “Jet Set,” a tribute to Fitzgerald’s music, is also on the program.)

“People go ‘Wow, that who was unexpected?’” says Battle. “I’m not much aware of how this would be perceived on the Alley company, on black bodies, and what that would say about the history of this country. ... What it says to the little black girl going, ‘Wow, I want to be beautiful like that,’” he says.

But they’ll also do two new, explicitly site-specific commissions: Kyle Abraham’s “United States,” which focuses on how the prison system affects African-American families; and company member Hope Boykin’s “Evolution, Dream,” inspired by the sermons and speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Abraham, a MacArthur “Genius” grant winner whose company has performed twice in Miami, has mixed feelings about the way his race affects how he’s seen as an artist.

“I think it’s important that black dance artists still feel they can be black and dance artists,” he says. “But that’s always going to be the lens,” he says. “People may try to make a connection to race or racial injustice in a way they may not with my white counterparts. But I take full ownership of who I am and the role of race in my life.”

Members of Abraham’s family and of his friends’ families have spent time in prison, and Abraham had been thinking about a piece on incarceration for a long time. “I think that disproportionate percentage of blacks in the prison system has become a hot topic, or that social media and smartphone videos have lit up public debate over police killings, is secondary. “My work was looking at these things before Black Lives Matter caught on,” Abraham says. “The work I’m making and having been making is part of our history. What’s changed, what hasn’t, and how can we be part of that change?”

For Boykin, who calls herself “a light at the end of the tunnel type girl,” it’s the “evolution” part of the title she pronounces “revolution” that is paramount. She was inspired by recordings of King’s speeches and sermons during a visit to the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta. (An original score by jazz musician Ali Jackson incorporates a recording of Leslie Odom Jr. of the musical “Hamilton.”)

Alvin Alley American Dance Theater’s Matthew Rushing and Rachael McLaren in Hope Boykin’s “Evolution, Dream,” inspired by Martin Luther King Jr.

If You Go

What: Alvin Alley American Dance Theater

When: 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 2 p.m. and 8 p.m.
Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday

Where: Adrienne Arsht Center, 3001 Biscayne Blvd., Miami

Info: $29 to $95 at arshtcenter.org or 305-494-6722

Alvin Alley American Dance Theater’s Matthew Rushing and Rachael McLaren in Hope Boykin’s “Evolution, Dream,” inspired by Martin Luther King Jr.

mission, like Black History Month, remains frustratingly relevant, so does the inspiration at the company’s heart.

“The truth is liberating,” says Battle. “That stuff really gets my juices flowing because it’s aspirational.” The arts can bridge the gap between culture and classes and bring people together.”