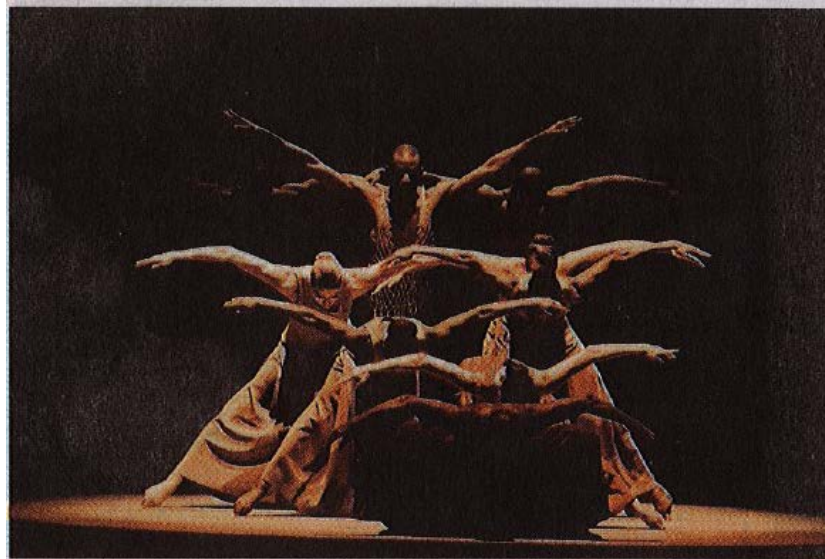


Chicago Tribune

Storied company stays vital while not forgetting its past

By: Lauren Warnecke

March 6, 2020



NAN MELVILLE PHOTO

"Revelations," the 1960 work created by the company's founder, is the standard ending to every Chicago performance of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

IN PERFORMANCE Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater ★★★

Storied company stays vital while not forgetting its past

Performances at Auditorium Theatre run through Sunday

BY LAUREN WARNECKE

There are two types of audience members who go to see Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater: Some sit through the show in order to see "Revelations" while others leave at the intermission, skipping "Revelations" altogether.

It's a testament to the dual roles this company serves as both a historical dance company that preserves and presents works by its founder and a troupe at the vanguard of contemporary dance.

Ailey has rightly earned its stripes as one of the nation's best dance companies, not just because of its history, but not in spite of it either. The company doesn't ignore its founder or allow itself to fade

Turn to **Dance**, Page 3

Dance

Continued from Page 1

into antiquity.

Much credit can be given to artistic director Robert Battle, the third person to hold that title since the company's 1958 founding. Battle was handpicked by Judith Jamison, who was handpicked by Alvin Ailey. But unlike Jamison, Battle did not spend his career dancing for the company he'd one day lead.

The door was always cracked for aesthetics that differed from Ailey's, which is an amalgam of the techniques developed by modern dance pioneers such as Lester Horton and Martha Graham. Battle pushed the door wide open, and Wednesday's program was a perfect example of this company's ethos in the Battle era.

Apart from "Revelations," Ailey's 1960 masterpiece that comes standard at the end of every show the late choreographer's company performs in Chicago, this was an entirely new-to-us program of Chicago premieres. Two other lineups comprise the company's Chicago residency at the Auditorium Theatre, ending Sunday. Wednesday night's performance will be repeated Saturday afternoon.

It starts with "Busk," by Canadian choreographer Azzure Barton, made in 2009 and added to Ailey's



PAUL KOLNIK PHOTO

"Ode" by choreographer Jamar Roberts is part of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's performance at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago.

rep last year. Chalvar Monteiro opens the piece, beginning seated on a dark staircase in a black hooded and baggy pants, with a black fedora placed across the stage. Nicole Pearce's stark lighting isolates the hat and Monteiro's white gloved hands. He magnificently pairs hip-hop-esque popping and mime; his body undulates, as if passing a ball of energy from hand to hand, then through his torso and legs.

James Gilmer and Jacquelin Harris pick up where Monteiro leaves off, with solos that get better as this intriguing work progresses. All three soloists deserve mention, though

I'm most drawn to this piece in the group sections, which feature as many as 13 dancers, all donning costumer Michelle Jank's frumpy, black clothes.

If you squint, you can see through "Busk's" dark, hard-hitting vocabulary and its monk-like groupthink (evoked by a mixed score that includes what sounds like Gregorian chanting) to find some ridiculous absurdities. It's almost as if Barton is offering a meta-analysis of her chosen profession, playing into dance's seriousness without letting go of an alternative history as arti-

fice and entertainment.

Look closely, and you'll see a multitude of hints: triple-time steps from tap dance, emboités from ballet, rubbing of forefingers and thumbs (the universal gesture for money) and popped pelvises, like "The Money Song" from Bob Fosse's "Cabaret" — all shrouded in a mystifying, exquisite emulsion of steps.

Second on the bill, "Ode" (2019) is the latest work from Jamar Roberts, a company dancer recently named choreographer-in-residence (the first in the company's history to hold that title). The piece opens

When: Through 3 p.m. Sunday

Where: Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Ida B. Wells Drive

Running time: 2 hours

Tickets: \$35-\$105 at 312-341-2300 and www.auditoriumtheatre.org

on a single dancer lying center stage, facing away from us on his side. Behind him hangs a cone-shaped backdrop, a mesh sheath covered in happy-looking, brightly colored flowers.

Five other men join (Saturday's matinee features an all-female cast), all of them shirtless with flowing, off-white pants, dancing in a virtuosic vernacular that is clearly rooted in Alvin Ailey's technique. They often look up; subtly religious gestures likewise draw our gazes to the space above the stage.

"Ode" is said to be an elegy to victims of gun violence, but it's not at all a display of the events which lead to death. Nor is it an

overtly political treatise.

Rather, "Ode" is an attempt to process gun violence, a bouquet of flowers laid upon on the graves of these victims. Roberts offers his thoughts on what lies beneath the earth or whatever realm exists after death.

Thus, "Ode" has a tenderness imbued in parts of the choreography that mimics the backdrop (by scenic designer Libby Stadstad). But it oscillates between this and effortful moments of strife and struggle. Echoed in the difficult piano score by Don Pullen, elements of jazz and gospel weave their way through a chaotic cacophony of sounds.

Those sweet moments of resolution, when they come, temper the more abrasive elements in this piece — both moods satisfying and equally moving.

Lauren Warnecke is a freelance critic.

lauren.warnecke@gmail.com