At Ailey's Gala, Different Kinds of Hope

By: Brian Seibert
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The new pieces include one by Jamar Roberts, whose recent work confirms his importance.

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The matador strength and strain of his stance, and the way his body leads, deliver more of the pain and mastery of Lewis's struggle than Ciburn's words in praise of his task describe.

Then "In Memory" by far the strongest piece of the evening, "Colored Me" is only an excerpt. Also, fortunately, more of Roberts's recent work can be found elsewhere. As Ailey's virtual program for Cal Performances, released earlier this month and available on demand through Sept. 6, features his new "Holding Space:"

"Colored Me" is a remarkable short film he made on his iPad at the start of the pandemic for Works & Process. Accompanied by bagpipes and drums, his tightly framed body movement, a sense of tragedy and the dancers take turns inside a cube of scaffolding on wheels, while other dancers move the cube around. Those accents are holding a space for the absent, but it's an ambiguous one: maybe a space of healing, maybe a cage.

This is a difference between Roberts and the noble choreographers of the gala program. His choreography — individual, original and worthy contemporary in feel — says something, even if it resists paraphrase. "Holding Space" ends with a backlit vision of the audience, which it's uplifting, is shaded by what precedes it and is thus our own.

The concurs with confinement has been a running theme in Roberts's work. It was the "in Cooped," the remarkable news film he made on his iPad at the start of the pandemic for Works & Process. Accompanied by bagpipes and drums, his tightly framed body movement, a sense of tragedy and the dancers take turns inside a cube of scaffolding on wheels, while other dancers move the cube around. Those accents are holding a space for the absent, but it's an ambiguous one: maybe a space of healing, maybe a cage.

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