Review: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is back at the Auditorium, timely and timeless

By: Lauren Warnecke
March 9, 2023 (Online: 3/7/23)

A palpable buzz overtook the Auditorium Theatre Wednesday, with a who’s who from the Chicago arts world arriving dressed to the nines for the 140-year-old venue’s annual gala.

It’s no surprise that this was also the opening night performance of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater’s annual pilgrimage to Chicago, a tradition that stems back 55 years. Chicago is woven into the fabric of this New York-based company, with several dancers calling the Windy City home and the Auditorium as a habitual tour stop every year — every year but one, of course. 2021 was canceled due to the pandemic.

Continuing through Sunday in three different programs, the legendary troupe presents classic works from the company’s past, folding in new-to-the repertoire from late founder Alvin Ailey’s peers and some of the leading voices in contemporary dance today. A few highlights include a revival of Teryl Thomas’s “Boy’s Joys” which Ailey adapted into its rep this season, performed Thursday and Saturday. Sunday boasts an all-Ailey program, with Monday’s bill includes new works by Kyle Abraham and outgoing resident choreographer Junar Roberts, plus a new-to-the-moment rework of Paul Taylor’s 1964 “Duet.”

Wednesday’s early evening show featured just three pieces, but in that brief, 90-minute morale, Alley once again proved its timeless and timelessness.

The night opened with Abraham’s latest work, “Are You in Your Feelings?” Created in 2022 specifically for the Aliley company, Abraham employs a time-bending playlist spanning the catalogs of luminary Black artists. Tracks are chopped pieced together, not appearing to play in any particular order, with The Flamingo’s “I Only Have Eyes for You” on one end of the timeline and Summer Walker and Kendrick Lamar on the other. In the middle: salient sounds of the ‘90s and early aughts surface with bits from Lauryn Hill, Erykah Badu and Drake.
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It sounds wholly discombobulating, but “Are You in Your Feelings?” is a slow and largely understated barn. Big pops of color in Karen Young’s costumes, made (crafts) under Don Scully’s lighting, give a theatrical shimmery to a piece that, by turns, feels nonchalant—apathetic even. To this, Abraham prescribes a beholding mix of pedestrian gestures and classical ballet steps, with a base of silky-smooth undulations that are more quintessentially him. These percussions occasionally sizzle in satisfying ways, but the tone is decid-
edly internal—it’s a groove that doesn’t aim to work. Yet, wow it does in a few remarkable moments! The piece opens and closes with dancers Ashley Kayla Ryan Green and Chavaur Moneiro matched up. They playfully poke and prod at each other with gentle shoes to a shoulder or leg, moving the pas de deux along. Green forms the central character here, in what Abraham describes as “a celebration of Black culture, Black music and the youthful spirit that perseveres in us all.” Literal bits of the culture creep in, with references to hand jive and vanguard, for example. That “Are You in Your Feelings?” throws in side ballet steps into the mix—really, Kyle, gavottes?—is perhaps his reminder that Black culture is not and never has been a universal experience.

After remarks from Auditoriums CEO Rich Regan and Allegra artistic director Robert Battle, Jacqueline Harris and Kamari Segura performed Battle’s bi-
titled 2007 duet, “Unfold.” In his remarks, Battle described the first time he heard Leontyne Price, the first African American opera singer to rise to international acclaim. “Unfold” is appropri-
ately revamped. Harris and Segura coddle their sinuosity frames almost as if undergoing an excision. But this passion is tempered by tender moments for the couple; it’s a lot packed into a very small space interpreting Chekov’s famous aria from “Leontyne.”

This expedited performance of others throughout the weekend will be closer to two hours in length ended, as all do, with Apple’s iconic masterpiece, “Revel-
lations.”

In a way, “Revelations” is the 1980s vintage edition of Abra-
ham’s “Are You in Your Feel-
ings?” A mixtape of era-relevant gospel hymns, Alverst sought to re-
represent Black culture and Black life through expressions of joy and hope. For the danc-
ers, it is no convention of their daily lives as routine as brushing their teeth. In his 23 years in the company, Chicago native Vernard Gilmor has performed this piece thousands of times. All the other times didn’t matter when he laid down at center-center, alone, in white pants and top for “I Want to Be Ready,” “Revelations” unapolo-
getically difficult display of tech-
nique and individual strength. If Gilmor’s not tired of this piece yet, neither am I.

Lauren Warnecke is a freelance critic.

When: Through March 12
Where: Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Ida B Wells Drive
Running time: 2 hours
Tickets: $63–$133 at 312-347-2300
and auditoriumtheatre.org