Mixtape Of Artistry and Legacy Gets Us ‘In Our Feelings’

By: Lauren Warnecke
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Review Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater **** 1/2

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For the Chicago Tribune

If a hot girl summer was a dance, it might look something like choreographer Kyle Abraham’s “Are You in Your Feelings”?! It’s vibrant and beautiful, fleeting and fluid, curious, casual and messy — in a good way.

Abraham’s third work for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater held the middle spot in a program of three works Wednesday, kicking off the dance company’s annual spring series in Chicago. The mixed bill is one of three alternating through Sunday at the Auditorium Theatre.

A second viewing of “Are You in Your Feelings” after last year’s Chicago premiere helped, as did time for the dancers to wrap their heads around the piece’s jumble of styles and steps. It’s not a literal or narrative journey — it’s a vibe, complemented by a mixtape of R&B, soul and hip-hop tracks and a stunning setting: indescent separates by costume designer Karen Young and an exquisite backdrop by lighting designer Dan Scully, who frames the ensemble with a semi-circular LED tube swooping through the vertical space, transposed periodically as a colorful scoop on the cyclorama.

Abraham sees the work’s nonchalant, pedestrian flavors with dashes of balletic and street dance vocabulary. Vignettes loosely translate to looking for love (occasionally in the wrong places). He seems nostalgic, nodding to a time when partners met each other in person, BBL, by happenstance — not by algorithm.

And that’s what makes it a beautiful mess.

One section, set to Shirley Brown’s “Woman to Woman,” finds Caroline Darreyn and Corin Rachelle Mitchell squabbling over the same man. A gorgeous pas de deux for Michael Jackson Jr. and James Gilmer burns slowly to Maxwell’s “Symptom Unknown.” But if Abraham made this piece with any one dancer in mind, it has to be powerhouse Ashley Kaylnn Green, who carries the piece all the way through to its sizzling end at the front of an ensemble that simmers, but never boils. Green is a reassuring reminder that you’ve got to love yourself before you can love anybody else, swerving in and out of a beautiful pairing with Chalvar Monteiro that begins and ends the piece but does not define her intoxicating essence.

The evening opened with choreographer Ronald K. Brown’s effervescent “Dancing Spirit,” a near-perfect example of composition distilling its essence in an Afro-Caribbean joy bomb to its very essence. In some ways, “Dancing Spirit” is an exercise in patience, beginning with dancer Solomon Dunne patterning through a series of simple, striking extensions of the arm, revolving in a singular spotlight upstage. Others join, repeating the phrase with subtle variations mimicked in designer Omotayo Wumi Olaiya’s individualized blue and white ombré dresses and separates. You see it enough times to recognize glimmers of this beginning woven throughout the piece and infused in its ebullient finale. Music by Wynton Marsalis, Radhe and War supports that emotional arc, but the beginning is accompanied by solo vibraphone, a recording of Stefons Harris’ arrangement of Duke Ellington’s “Single Petal of a Rose.” Originally part of his 1959 “Queen’s Suite,” Ellington made just one copy of the work at first, and presented it to Queen Elizabeth II. Brown created “Dancing Spirit” as an homage to Ellington’s matriarch, artistic director emerita Judith Jamison, who was in the director’s chair when the piece premiered in 2009. She’ll turn 81 in May.

“Generous, elegant, royal servant. Yenne,” says Brown in a recording describing the piece. He references the Yoruba goddess of creation, water, motherhood and protection. “Moving together on a shared accord — path clearly designed by the most high and all her or his servants.”

Indeed, Jamison’s life force continues to be felt in the Ailey company and pulses through soloist Hannah Althea Richardson’s torso and out through her fingertips in “Dancing Spirit’s” most literal reference to her legacy — Richardson’s partner Dunias, who embodies a part originated by the current captain of the Ailey ship, Matthew Rushing, who stepped in last winter when artistic director Robert Battle stepped away after 12 years at the helm.

Alley’s 1969 classic “Revelations” acts as the customary finale to this and a third line-up of Alley classics, but they’re daring to remove it from Program B this exciting sampling of new and refurbished works by Elizabeth Roxas-Dodrill, Hans van Manen, Alonzo King and Amy Hall Garner running Friday and Saturday night.

Lauren Warnecke is a freelance critic.

Where: Through Sunday
Where: Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Ida B. Wells Drive
Running time: 2 hours, 25 minutes with two intermissions
Tickets: $40-$174 at 312-341-2300 and auditoriumtheatre.org