

April 18, 2010

Hot Prospects

1.2.3 Festival Opening Night
Taylor 2 | ABT II | Ailey II
The Joyce Theater
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by Kathleen O'Connell

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On the road and out of town for many months of the year, ABT II, Ailey II, and Taylor 2 perform a signal service for the arts by bringing live dance to cities and schools across the U.S. They're back home for while and in rotation at the Joyce, where each will present its own evening-length program during the 1.2.3 Festival (April 14—April 29). The Festival's opening night presented a one-time-only opportunity to sample all three companies on the same program. There was a world premiere, a new production, and a chance to see an alternate take on a repertory staple. Ho-hum. Whatever. The *real* reason to go, of course, was to scout out the new talent and be the first on your block to see a star in the making.

Taylor 2 opened the program with "Company B," a work beloved of audiences and artistic directors everywhere. It's in the repertory of both Taylor troupes and no fewer than five U.S. ballet companies for good reason: the Andrews Sisters music is nostalgic pop perfection, the steps make the dancers look terrific, and the work's evocation of love and loss in wartime is shaded with just enough irony to keep it from tipping over into Greatest Generation sentimentality without sending everyone home in a sour funk.

Commissioned by the Houston Ballet in 1991, "Company B" was originally choreographed for thirteen dancers. Taylor 2 performed the version restaged for three men and three women in 1994. The reduced forces didn't diminish the work's impact: what it may have lost in eye-filling scale it gained in affecting intimacy. The spare casting of the ebullient, jitterbug-inflected dances threw the intermittent images of dying soldiers into proportionately sharper relief. By the time we reached "There Will Never Be Another You," the work's second-to-last number (touchingly performed by Christina Lynch Markham and John Eirich), we'd formed a strong enough attachment to all six dancers as individuals to feel the heartbreaking finality those words can have in wartime.

The Taylor 2 dancers don't yet move with the preternaturally frictionless weight of the main company's current roster (who does?), but they're all nonetheless polished, practiced in the company style, and sweetly engaging. Despite their youth—or perhaps because of it—they brought out the work's dark substrate. In "Rum and Coca-Cola"—a song about GIs based in Trinidad during WWII—Latra Wilson skipped around her panting

admirers with more saucy, girlish glee than knowing seductiveness, the better to bring home the ugly implications of the song's perversely jaunty refrain: "Both mother and daughter / Workin' for the Yankee dollar."

Justin Kahan was particularly winning in two of the work's star turns: first as the nerdy chick magnet of "Oh, Johnny!, Oh, Johnny! Oh!" whose appeal surely lies in his being the only guy around (those thick glasses suggest a medical deferment), and then as the effortlessly charismatic "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" cut down by gunfire at the end of the title song.



TAYLOR 2 Justin Kahan in Paul Taylor's COMPANY B photo by Tom Casaglin

ABT II was up next with the world premiere of Edwaard Liang's "Ballo Per Sei" (Dance for Six), a pretty enough muddle of a ballet as unremarkable as its title and as unadventurous as the mixtape of interchangeable Vivaldi to which was set. (At least it wasn't Arvo Pärt.) None of this is the dancers' fault, of course, and the work's entire charm lay in the smiling world-premiere pride they brought to its performance.

"Ballo Per Sei's" vocabulary was solidly classical at its core—there were passages that looked downright academic—but Liang appears to have no faith in classicism's expressive power nor any sense of how to mold it into a distinctive style. He slapped a quick topcoat of conventionally quirky gestures onto his steps to make them look new and resorted to death-wish partnering in the received millennial style to emulate drama. In one maneuver, the men sank into a lunge while the women leaned forward and balanced on their tummies against their partners' lowered heads. It looked as absurd as it sounds, but nothing else in the work suggested that it was purposefully absurd.

The work nonetheless abounded in challenging—and flattering—opportunities for ABT II's young dancers to show what they could do, and they dug into them with enthusiasm. Meaghan Grace Hinkis' centered poise and musicality drew the eye, as did the pliancy of Calvin Royal's upper body and the energized sweep of his long arms. Liang gets full marks for giving the women brisk allegro variations in addition to stretchy partnered work so they could show off the full range of their technique. Full marks, too, for giving the men beats in addition to meaty jumps and turns. They could still use some polish, but it was a pleasure to watch them tear around the Joyce stage as if all outdoors wouldn't have been big enough to hold them either.

Ailey II closed the program with a new production of "Divining," Judith Jamison's first work, choreographed in 1984. Andy Kay's costumes—patterned, multi-layered tabards over body stockings—are a definite improvement over the original production's saggy white leggings and crayon-colored wrap skirts. Timothy Hunter's lighting design is similar in style to the original, but the colors seem more saturated and the projections more dramatic. The Ailey II dancers looked splendid in it, and danced with so much assured verve and mature polish that labeling them a "junior" troupe hardly seems appropriate. But the real news was Ghrai DeVore.

"Divining," set to a drum-based score by Kimati Dinizulu and Monti Ellison, was a stylized evocation of a shamanistic ritual. Its first section, "Seeking," opened with four mysterious figures bowing forward and rippling back, arms at their sides, to an eerie, high-pitched melody; it looked as ancient and otherworldly as the nesting ceremonies of cranes. The drums kicked in and the dancers began their sinuous progress around the stage, spinning through high-kicked turns and balances. DeVore—their priestess, or perhaps their goddess—paced on with feral intensity and was instantly riveting just standing there.

Her solo in the second section, "Resting" was the work's centerpiece and the evening's highlight. (Unless the Ailey company lets her slip through its fingers, she's bound perform it as an extract at every gala.) Fine-limbed and beautifully proportioned (she appears more majestically scaled than she really is), her every move—whether sinuous or abrupt, boldly expansive or finely detailed—seemed informed by a beam of tightly focused energy. She slowly unfurled a sky-high penchée, sweeping her right arm past her head in unhurried circles all the while. Then, quick as a flash she was standing with that same arm held upright, her upper body snapping like a plucked string in perfect sympathy with the music. Leading the full company through the fast-paced group dances of the final section, "Moving On," she brought the evening to a triumphant close.



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Top: Ailey II in "Divining"; photo by Eduardo Patino
Middle: Justin Kahan in "Company B"; photo by Tom Caravaglia
Bottom: Ghrai DeVore in "Divining"; photo by Eduardo Patino