



Starting a New Era With Graciousness, Taste and Tradition

When Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater opened its annual season at City Center on Wednesday, it did so under a new artistic director, Robert Battle. But an Ailey gala is a set ritual, a glamorous fundraiser as much about donors as about dancers, and in conforming to the standard of years past, this one sent a message of continuity.

BRIAN SEIBERT
DANCE REVIEW

After the thanking of donors and the announcement of the haul — an on-par \$2.5 million, a good sign during a changeover — came the man of the hour. Where his predecessor, Judith Jamison, played sass off a queenly hauteur, Mr. Battle is all down-home. Throughout the evening he punned and teased. He quoted his great-uncle and used phrases like “oh my gravy.” He’ll do fine.

Ms. Jamison was represented as the choreographer of the eve-

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's season runs through Jan. 1 at City Center, 131 West 55th Street, Manhattan; (212) 581-1212, nycitycenter.org.

ning's first dance. Choreography was never her strong suit, and her “If It’s Magic” is a trifle, even with John Legend singing at a grand piano. The solo, however, did serve as a reintroduction to Alicia Graf Mack, an impossibly long-limbed, classically trained dancer who returns to the company this season. The piece didn’t give her much to do beyond stretching, but — oh my gravy — is she a gorgeous mover.

In including a piece by Ms. Jamison, Mr. Battle showed his graciousness; in his first addition to the repertory he showed his taste. Paul Taylor’s “Arden Court” is a real masterpiece, and by selecting it Mr. Battle makes good on Mr. Ailey’s too rarely realized vision of the company as a home for great works of modern dance.

The choice also reveals another lineage. Mr. Battle’s mentor at Juilliard was Carolyn Adams, the first black dancer in the Taylor troupe, and Mr. Battle became a choreographer while a member of David Parsons’s company. Ms. Adams and Mr. Parsons were in the original cast of “Arden Court”

and in the audience on Wednesday, along with Mr. Taylor.

Though they could use some polishing, the Ailey dancers are marvelous in “Arden Court.” The six bare-chested men who dominate the work embody Mr. Taylor’s beefy male ideal. Never before has it been so ripped. The excellent cast members haven’t yet found the ideal tone for the work’s abundant wit, its con-

trasts of low comedy with courtly heights. But they play it straight, which is much better than mugging, and they know just what to do with the leaping processions that open and close the piece. Score one for Mr. Battle.

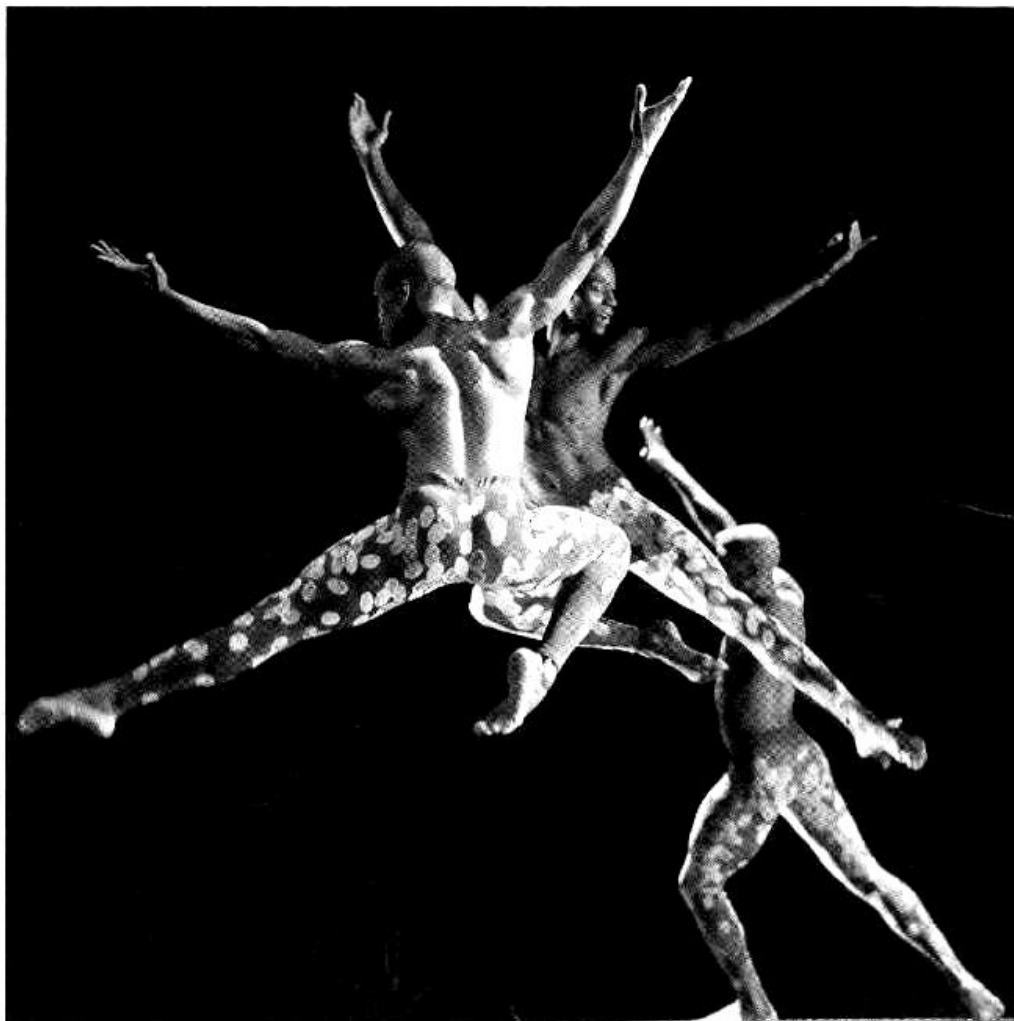
His motives for including Lar Lubovitch’s “Prelude to the Kiss” are more of a mystery, though after a sultry introduction by the honorary co-chairwomen Iman,

the duet did offer Clifton Brown and Linda Celeste Sims a chance to be super sexy. That’s part of the Ailey tradition too.

Ending with Mr. Ailey’s “Revelations” is not a matter of choice. Mr. Battle gave us the expanded version, with a cast of 50 and live music. The singers, particularly Ella Mitchell and Kenny Brawner, are a great improvement over the usual dated recording, but the

extra dancers muddy Mr. Ailey’s brilliant compositions. That’s a quibble, though, with performances like those of Ms. Sims, Mr. Brown, Ms. Mack, Antonio Douthit, Kirven James Boyd and Matthew Rushing.

They are just the standouts in the amazing company that Mr. Battle now runs. Will he do right by it? So far, so good.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA NICHI, THE NEW YORK TIMES

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater The troupe’s season-opening show at City Center included a performance of Paul Taylor’s “Arden Court” with, above left, Kirven James Boyd and Linda Celeste Sims, and, above from left, Mr. Boyd, Samuel Lee Roberts and Antonio Douthit.