

The New York Times

December 10, 2012

The Sexual Duel in an Eyebrow-Raising Ballet

Jiri Kylian's "Petite Mort" is predictably a dance of duets. It takes two, as they say in another sexual euphemism, to tango.

But before the six couples here reach their stylized climaxes, their entwined limbs alternately thrusting and splaying, the audience sees the men alone, moving in tandem with sinuous fencing foils: foreplay with props. The women stand in a shadowy row upstage, their bodies appearing to be sheathed in voluminous gowns. The men have their weapons; the women, their armor.

Mr. Kylian created "Petite Mort" in 1991 for his Nederlands Dans Theater; it is a staple for many troupes and is among the pieces included in this Czech choreographer's "Black & White Ballets." But it was new to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater as of Friday, when it had its company premiere at City Center.

This is the first Kylian ballet to enter the Ailey inventory, part of the artistic director Robert Battle's campaign to bring in new works. Besides the inevitable "Revelations," Friday's program included what is so far Mr. Battle's most satisfying addition to the repertory, Rennie Harris's terrifically alive "Home" (2011).

At first the men have their weapons; the women, their armor.

Like no other Ailey dance I can think of, "Home" shows off the dancers as individuals, with each performer adding textures to the already rich hip-hop-based structures. The fiercely elegant Jacqueline Green was a particular standout on Friday.

Ms. Green also danced in "Revelations" and "Petite Mort." But Mr. Kylian's ballet, set to two sublime Mozart piano concertos and bathed in golden light by Joop Caboot, seeks a streamlined surface in its eyebrow-raised examination of the sexual duel. It is later revealed that the dresses are sculptural crinolines on wheeled platforms; the women are actually wearing structured, gleaming undergarments like the men's, designed by Joke Visser.

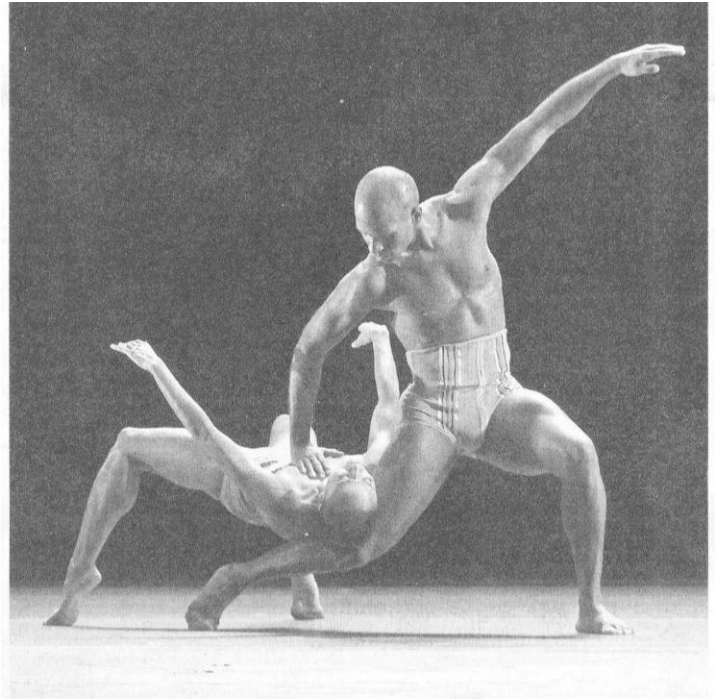
The dancers are meant to look good, and they do, though the choreography's balletic ardor is at times giggle inducing. Yet somehow this frothy European decadence is refreshing on the Ailey dancers. There's no spiritualism on sale here, only sex.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater continues performances through Dec. 30 at City Center, 131 West 55th Street, Manhattan; (212) 581-1212, nycitycenter.org.

ONLINE: ALVIN AILEY

➤ *More images of the company in performance:*

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ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES
Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Linda Celeste Sims and Glenn Allen Sims in "Petite Mort" at City Center.