

December 9, 2010

Voodoo, Vivid Colors And Strange Visions

Watching “Celebrating ‘Revelations’ at 50,” the film tribute by Judy Kinberg that precedes the piece during the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater’s current season, it’s notable

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how rough hewn — and powerful — the dancing looks in the historical footage of Ailey and others performing in that work. Today the Ailey dancers are sleek, athletic masters of the universe, and the pieces routinely draw midmovement applause and cheers for moments of virtuosity.

Geoffrey Holder’s 1968 “Prodigal Prince,” revived at City Center on Tuesday night after 12 years, comes from a time when the Ailey company repertory wasn’t quite so tailored to technical display. (In 1970 Clive Barnes wrote in *The New York Times* that the troupe’s standards never drop below “at least modest accomplishment.”)

“Prince” offers a pageantlike depiction of moments in the life of Hector Hyppolite, the Haitian painter who was also a voodoo high priest. It’s a visual feast, with music and fantastical costumes by Mr. Holder, a theatrical polymath who has been a dancer, choreographer, actor, director, costume designer and a well-regarded painter during his long career.

The piece opens with low drumming sounds, and an image of Hyppolite’s vision: the visitation of the voodoo goddess Erzulie (Briana Reed) and St. John the Baptist (Clifton Brown), foretelling his fame as an artist. Ms. Reed, costumed in a long turquoise robe and headdress, and Mr. Brown in a bright green, slit-to-the-thigh tunic, are both marvelously ambiguous in these roles; you’re not quite sure if they are forces of benevolence or harm as they perform opaque rites of invocation and exorcism around the painter (Kirven James Boyd).

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater’s season continues through Jan. 2 at City Center, 131 West 55th Street, Manhattan; (212) 581-1212, nycitycenter.org.



ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Kirven James Boyd, left, and Clifton Brown in “The Prodigal Prince” at City Center.

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Additional images from “The Prodigal Prince”:

nytimes.com/dance

Mr. Holder adds a chorus of figures in voluminous white, their faces swathed in dark veils, led by a woman (“The Mambo/Le Serviteur,” performed by Renee Robinson) who brings Hyppolite a white bird and dances with him in a duet of whirling turns and high-swirling legs. Mr. Boyd, a late replacement for Samuel Lee Roberts, was remarkable here, technically fine and touching in his evocation of an overwhelming sensory bewilderment.

The sensory qualities of “Prince” are its most notable features. It’s hard to remember much about the actual choreography, or to follow the story and characters, unless you are well-primed by program notes or happen to be a Haitian folklore scholar. The movement is entirely at the service of the theatrical whole, rather than the *raison d’être*. (Even Mr. Boyd gets a limited amount of dancing, spending a reasonable part of the piece lying flat on his back.) But the hallucinatory, out-of-body experience, the sonorous drumming, the vivid colors and dreamlike actions that Mr. Holder conjures make for a compel-

ling spectacle that isn’t the usual one seen on Ailey stages today.

Matthew Rushing’s “Uptown,” which opened the program, is the usual one, with plenty of sleek, enjoyable dancing from the company. Created last year, it pays tribute to the Harlem Renaissance through its music (Fats Waller and Count Basie, among others) and scenes that depict the period craze for swing dance, its artists, thinkers, writers and entertainers. Mr. Rushing uses a narrator, Victor (a debonair Abdur-Rahim Jackson), to guide us through these scenes, but the effect is an oddly didactic one, as if the piece had been created for a history workshop.

Occasionally “Uptown” coheres into theatrical life, notably in the “Rent Party” sequence, in which Mr. Rushing perfectly evokes a period feel and the eternal truth of just having fun. And the meditative solo for the scholar W. E. B. DuBois (beautifully danced by Glenn Allen Sims) brings a welcome interiority to the work.

An oddly flat “Revelations” concluded the program; although both dancers and audience perked up a bit in the final section, there wasn’t even the obligatory encore. So even “Revelations” can have an off night. Who knew? **A**