

Keepers Of That Flame

The dancers ended on their knees, the audience surged to its feet. It was business as usual Wednesday night at City Center, where Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater opened its annual Midtown season with a star-studded gala. The show's anchor: "Revelations" of course.

**DANCE
REVIEW**

**CLAUDIA
LA ROCCO**

Still, unusual business looms. Even as the company celebrates Judith Jamison's 20th anniversary as artistic director, the search is on for her successor. Various portrayals of Ms. Jamison as keeper of the Ailey flame were shared throughout the evening. It is difficult to imagine who might step in to fill her shoes on this front. Then again, some flames can be guarded too closely.

After a glowing introduction by Pauletta Washington, the gala's honorary



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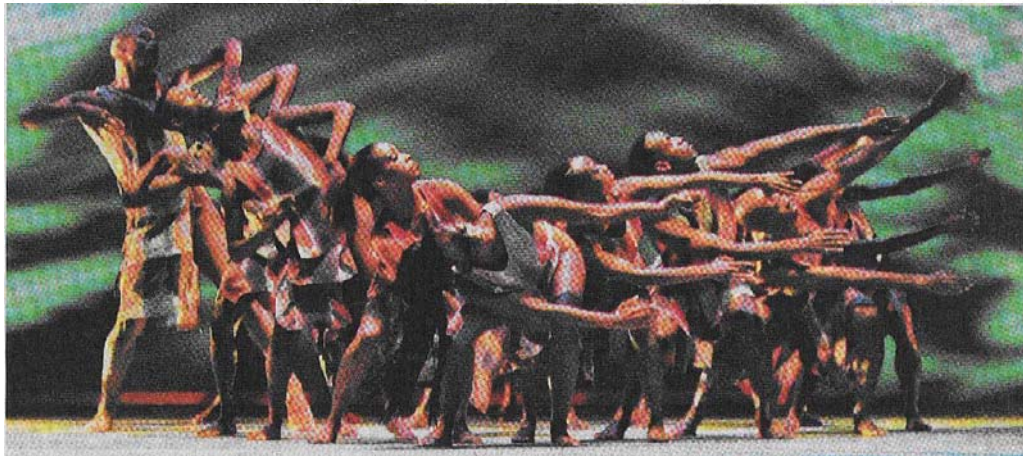
Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Constance Stamatou in the gala at City Center.

chairwoman along with Denzel Washington, her husband (who was absent), Ms. Jamison swept onto the stage, looking her usual fierce self in a flowing black outfit and sparkling jewelry.

Like many great former dancers, she

has elegance and power that seem to have been distilled into her fantastically expressive hands. "Hi y'all, how you doing?" she asked. "I'm fine. I know I'm fine." (Why can't all gala speeches be

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Members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Judith Jamison's "Divining" at the opening night gala.

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this stylish?) As for her company, it is both fine and not fine.

Its Ninth Avenue home still seems new and shiny, the touring never stops, the money keeps rolling in. (Wednesday night's gala was entirely underwritten, meaning all the guests and their checkbooks counted as gravy.) And what's not to love about a troupe that counts artists like the incomparable Linda Celeste Sims and Clifton Brown among its dancers?

But then we arrive at the problem of the Ailey repertory and how impossibly thin it sometimes feels. (Thank heavens for the choreographer Ronald K. Brown, though more than intermittent commissions of his work are

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater continues through Jan. 3 at City Center, 131 West 55th Street, Manhattan; (212) 581-1212 or alvinailey.org

needed.) The gala's first half felt downright threadbare; even the onstage presence of the Wynton Marsalis Septet couldn't enliven an aerobicsesque excerpt from Ms. Jamison's 2001 work "Here ... Now," created for the 2002 Winter Olympics.

An excerpt from "Divining" (Ms. Jamison created the dance in 1984, her first for the company) feels similarly boilerplate in its sensually lush depiction of ritualized encounters, set to Kimati Dinizulu and Monti Ellison's rhythmic, mysterious music and unfolding within a mesh of light projections evoking thick vegetation.

"It should be called sexy jungle," my date whispered happily to me. The company knows its way around crowd-pleasers.

Sandwiched between these works were a musical interlude, led by Mr. Marsalis, and "Anew," the choreographer Robert Battle's surprise gift to Ms. Jamison. This pièce d'occasion, a brief

duet by Mr. Brown and Jamar Roberts, was slight but winsome, casting the bare-chested dancers as spiritual searchers and making full use of their immense physical gifts through a mish-mash of movement styles.

And then it was time for "Revelations," Ailey's seminal work. The story here was the live music, particularly the chorus. Conducted by Ray Chew, the singers lent soaring vigor and melancholy depths to these stirring gospel songs. Robert Mack, the soloist for "I Wanna Be Ready," was a particular highlight, infusing the traditional lyrics with a rough-hewn intensity as if overwhelmed by the beauty and power of the forces rushing through him.

Some of the dancers, especially the heavy-duty emoters, might

learn from Mr. Mack. "Revelations" trades in big, broadly rendered emotions. If not given a little nuance and some raggedy edges, these sentiments grow cloying.

Grand shows don't always equal great art.