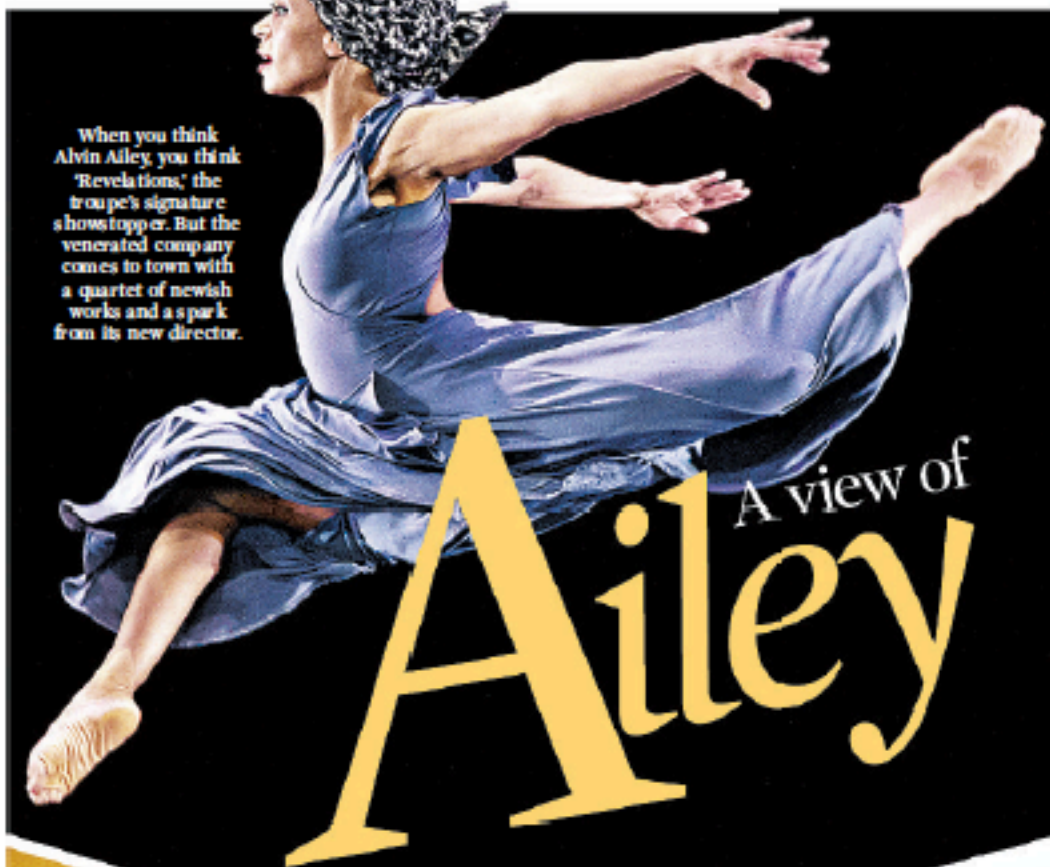


February 21, 2014

ON THE TOWN

When you think Alvin Ailey you think 'Revelations,' the troupe's signature showstopper. But the venerated company comes to town with a quartet of newish works and a spark from its new director.



Ailey

A view of



Carrying on

What do you do when faced with an unforeseen setback? Chicago jazzman Paul Catalano, after a serious auto accident, was forced to almost learn his craft. Howard Reich talks to him about new beginnings.



It don't mean a thing...

When Rick Warrenhouse does his thing, he isn't just playing. It brings soul and swing musicians from a feeling to a rhythm that's hard to deny. Greg Kot talks to him about an old on and making a good thing even better.



That live sound

In The Theater Loop, Tribune critic Chris Jones weighs in on live music at the theater as an essential component of the musical theater experience. Talk is cheap, and so is tape — let the musicians play on.

Alvin Ailey dancers step it up with new talent, new works

By LAURA MOLZAHN
Special to the Tribune

Though Robert Battle has helmed Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for only three seasons, he's already put his stamp on the company, having essentially taken it into the 21st century. That wasn't a conscious decision, he says; it's more "what I gravitate to and feel I can add."

Previous artistic director Judith Jamison gave him the best advice: "coming into this legacy," Battle explains. "She said, 'Just trust your instincts; that's why I chose you.' That gave me license to move this company forward."

The four new or newish works, all of which had their Ailey debuts last year, on the company's Auditorium programs from Feb. 28 through March 9 span a range of dance styles and choreographic signatures. In general, Battle says, he wants to "honor the past, but then look at the present and reveal new or burgeoning talent that bridges the gap between past, present and future."

Wayne McGregor's "Chroma," he says, "captures the whole energy of the future." Created for London's Royal Ballet in 2006, it features a minimalist set by architect-designer John Pawson and music by Joby Talbot, including his orchestrations of songs by the White Stripes. "And then you see 'Revelations,' created in 1960, on the same program," Battle says. "It's really exciting."

"Lift" is Azure Barton's first Ailey commission; if her name sounds familiar, it's because Hubbard Street commissioned her resonant "Untouched" in 2010. Battle has known her since she was 16 years old and visited her older sister, Cherice, at Juillard, where he was also studying. "I've watched her grow," he says, "from dancing with different companies to aspiring to make her own work — and loved what I was seeing as it grew."

Her work, Battle says, has "a raw physicality, even a bombastic side: the athletic, the courageous, the unexpected. It's thought-provoking, it keeps you guessing, it's sometimes ironic. And her musicality is quite brilliant."

Curtis Macdonald, whose percussion Barton also used in "Untouched," created the score for "Lift," music she describes as "really beautiful and dense. Some of it is wood percussion, some of it is breath sounds — the heart chakra sound."

"Lift" is a work for 19 dancers. "It's big," Barton says. "I had an incredible time working with the Ailey dancers. I didn't know them at all, just from watching them over the years. But the reason I have so many of them is I loved the participation of so many. Every person was equally valued in the process, though, of course, there are some people who are noticed, just like in a conversation."



PHIL HOLNEK/ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER PHOTO

Linda Celeste Sims and Jamar Roberts in Azure Barton's "Lift," which will be performed by the Alvin Ailey troupe in Chicago.

What she'd really like someday, she says, would be for the men and women to exchange roles: "They're all so strong."

Asked about the effect of "Lift," Barton says, "It's hard not to hoot and holler when you see those dancers on stage. Of course, I want everyone to have their own experience, but what I felt personally, after leaving the process, was that I had more breath in my body. I was inspired, full, energized."

Unlike McGregor and Barton, choreographers Bill T. Jones and Ronald K. Brown, who also have Ailey premieres on these programs, have been part of the family for decades. Ailey commissioned "Fever Swamp" from Jones in 1983.

According to Battle, he recognized and wanted to nurture a fellow "pioneering spirit" who was "charting his own course and resisting some of the definitions of what an African-American

choreographer should be."

A few years after "Fever Swamp," in 1989, Jones created the groundbreaking "D-Man in the Waters (Part I)" for his own company, which performed it here a few times in the early '90s. Last year, Jones set its "Part I" on the Ailey company, and in a way the piece comes back full circle with Ailey performing it. In the studio, Battle says, Jones kept saying things like, "Oh, now this is from 'Wade in the Water.'" Or, "Mr. Ailey is all over this dance."

Brown's "Four Corners," which includes angels among its 11 dancers, is his fifth Ailey commission. Battle describes Brown as still a beautiful dancer and says that in the studio "he'll sometimes get up and start riffing like a jazz musician. He doesn't say anything and the dancers just follow him. It's really something. And that spontaneity, that sort of getting to the root of things, is what you see on stage — that journey, that

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

When: Feb. 28 through March 9

Where: Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress Parkway

Tickets: \$32-\$92 at 800-982-2787 or ticketmaster.com

depth, that celebration of life and that storytelling."

Battle, who praises his colleagues to the skies, is clearly no slouch himself as leader. Barton, who's known him 20-odd years, calls him "the most deserving, warm-hearted, generous person. And he's crazy. He makes everyone laugh. It's nice to see him with the dancers: They look up to him, but they can also have a good time and feel like they're supported. The atmosphere is light."

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PHOTO BY ANDREW ECCLES

Robert Battle is in his third season as artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.