

Celebrating women with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

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By Zita Allen



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Hope Boykin in Matthew Rushing's "Odetta." STEVE WILSON

Deck the halls! It's that time of year! Wednesday, Dec. 3, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater season comes to the City Center Theater and runs through Sunday, Jan. 4.

If variety is the spice of life, it is also the signature of this company, whose repertory includes works created by exceptionally gifted choreographers and performed by dancers capable of deftly juggling styles ranging from modern to ballet, African and hip-hop—sometimes all in one evening.

This season's highlights include "Odetta," the world

premier of Matthew Rushing's tribute to the legendary folk singer; "Awassa Astrige/Ostrich," the return of African dancer and choreographer Asadata Dafora's landmark 1932 solo; and Christopher Wheeldon's haunting "After the Rain Pas de Deux." There's also a return of such eclectic favorites as Ohad Naharin's propulsive "Minus-16," Wayne McGregor's futuristic "Chroma," Ronald K. Brown's transcendent "Grace" and Bill T. Jones' provocative "D-Man in the Waters"—and, of course, among others, Ailey's masterpiece "Revelations," accompanied by live music at select performances.

It's no secret that the Ailey dancer is a special breed of artist. Their versatility, dramatic ability and technical brilliance are a never-ending source of delight.

A few years ago, the Ailey season paid homage to the company's male dancers, and with good reason. After all, their jaw-dropping performances always send chills up and down our collective spine. Now, this season offers an opportunity to sing the praises of the Ailey women.

Ailey women have always been special. Think "Cry," Ailey's homage to his mother and all women that he created and mounted by the legendary Judith Jamison. Countless other works in the Ailey repertory also pay tribute to specific women or womanhood in general. Women have always been special for Ailey, whether they were the subject of dances, like Horton dancer and teacher Joyce Trisler ("Memoria"); muses, like Carmen de Lavallade, Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus or Janis Joplin; or featured dancers, like Renee Robinson, infusing performances with a special blend of strength and tenderness.

This season, while women will undoubtedly stand out in every program, a key vehicle for this tribute to them will be Jacquelyn Buglisi's "Suspended Women," a mesmerizing ballet featuring 12 female dancers in an homage to the challenges and strength of women across the ages.

Recently, the Amsterdam News caught up with three very different Ailey dancers during a rehearsal break and asked them to define what an Ailey female dancer is and what makes her unique.

Versatility is what stood out most for Linda Celeste Sims, recent recipient of the Bessie Award and a dancer who, one critic said, "rocks us into a state of bliss." "Being able to do all these different styles of works is really what an Ailey woman is," Sims said. "This company really embraces womanhood and highlights women. In fact, I feel the women are just as powerful as the men are, and Jacquelyn Buglisi's haunting 'Streaming Women' really continues the mission of presenting strong, positive female images."

Authenticity was a characteristic mentioned most by newer company member Sarah Daley, who said Buglisi's work captures the importance of that by urging the Ailey women to "go deep into ourselves to find the woman that we admire in others so we can portray that onstage."

Veteran Ailey dancer Hope Boykin, on the other hand, pointed to something equally illusive and described it by referring to her experience not as an Ailey dancer since 2000, but as a teacher of young aspiring dancers at the Ailey school.

"When I teach my kids, I ask them, 'Who's awesome?' and they answer, 'I'm awesome.' That's something Ailey women possess," Boykin said. "There is a confidence that the women in the company carry. Some of them don't even realize that they have it, but there is a pride and a security and a strength that is always present. I don't think we can put humility and pride together, but there really is a sense of knowing that you are capable without being conceited. And that's something that's really beautiful in Ailey women."

All three women will be performing in Buglisi's "Streaming Women" and in a host of other works throughout the AAADT's winter season, as they and the other Ailey dancers give us a thrilling display of that versatility, authenticity and, yes, confidence, that shines through the entire repertory as the Ailey company's incomparable women (and stunning men) take the stage. Don't miss it.