



# Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater expertly interprets music



The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performed choreography by Ailey, Garth Fagan and Kyle Abraham this weekend.

GAVIN HUANG / THE DARTMOUTH STAFF

By Aaron Colston  
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The legendary Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater enthralled audiences in Moore Theater this weekend with performances both new and old. One of many stops along a U.S. tour, the production featured choreography by Ailey, Garth Fagan and Kyle Abraham under the guidance of artistic director Robert Battle, this term's visiting Montgomery Fellow.

The show opened with Abraham's "Another Night," a dazzling work in part commissioned by the Hopkins Center in celebration of the Year of the Arts. Set to Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers' recording of Dizzy Gillespie's "Night in Tunisia," Abraham's choreography captures frantic pace of city street traffic through the energy and humor of the dancers' solos.

What made this performance exciting is that it moves beyond an exact translation

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of the music. A dancer's kick or turn often prompted a series of phrases which ran alongside the music, while at other times, the dancers' movements fitted effortlessly with a trumpet's sudden melodic leap or a piano's run down the keys. Expertly crafted, the piece avoids self-importance in favor of affecting a youthful, ambitious spirit.

Ailey's "Pas de Duke" is a play on the pas de deux ballet form that features two dancers. Originally performed by Judith Jamison and Mikhail Baryshnikov in 1976 for the nation's bicentennial, Ailey's pas is sequenced to the music of American jazz great Duke Ellington.

Even if the ballet form Ailey speaks to seems unfamiliar, the internal call-and-response between the dancers flowed like a conversation. While the movement of the dancers was seamlessly elegant, the troupe also displayed its humor and playfulness.

Fagan's "From Before," arranged to the music of Ralph MacDonald, draws upon modern Afrocentric imagination to express yearning for a world before the African diaspora. Fagan is perhaps best known today for his choreography of Broadway's "The Lion King."

The aesthetic yearning of Fagan's piece was reflected in its West African and Afro-Caribbean elements, invoked through polyrhythm, luminously consonant vocals and the use of steel drum. The blend of these elements with funky electronic sounds gives Fagan's choreography a distinct flavor. He plays with a sense of tradition, mixing dance and new meanings of motion — sometimes the dancers all stand still, look onward, imagining together.

The program closed with "Revelations," Ailey's transcendent journey through the African-American cultural imagination. Set to African-American spirituals like "I Been 'Buked" and "Fix Me, Jesus," "Revelations" communicates the travail of the human spirit as it searches for meaning.

The illuminating energy of the choreography is at times solemn and celebratory, showing its varied emotional turns.

"Revelations" finds meaning in the relationship between the soul and Christ, as translated in the moving dance for two "Fix Me, Jesus." "Wade in the Water" and "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham," draw on the baptismal rites and liturgy of the African-American church tradition. The intersection of the soul and Christ can be frightening, too, as shown in "Sinner Man," where the dancers express frantic terror or woeful fright.

The modern jazz influences in this weekend's performances greatly contributed to the company's broader cultural project by melding New World influences to the Old.

"When you look at what's going on, it's more of an exchange than it is an aspiration to be European," Battle said. "We have an American invention — modern dance and jazz — and we need to celebrate that."

Battle previously visited campus from Feb. 26 to 28 as the College's Montgomery Fellow.

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Battle directed his own dance theater company, Battleworks, before Jamison, artistic director emerita of Alvin Ailey, tapped him as her successor in July 2011.

The celebration of invention that the Ailey troupe displayed goes beyond Hanover; it is part of an age-long project to assert racial equality.

“The reason Alvin Ailey called it the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was in some way to reflect that we are American too,” Battle said. “This country that didn’t consider African-Americans to be human, let alone American, had to deal with itself when it claimed its American heritage.”

The gift of the African-American tradition brings to the dance world is certainly not lost on the dancers in the company.

“The Ailey company uses many different styles,” dancer Jacqueline Green said. “We do Afro-Caribbean, we use ballet, modern, jazz, and hip hop, contemporary, everything. So all the dancers in the company are well-rounded.”

However, the range of dance skill and diversity of the dance company is sometimes lost on viewers.

“It’s strange that we’re seen as a black company when it was always a diverse company,” dancer Sean Carmon said during a post-performance discussion. “[Dance companies] like these were created in the ’60s and ’50s because African-Americans couldn’t find a place to dance because no one was hiring us.”

This type of inclusivity is a deliberate goal of the tradition of the company today.

“We are still fighting to get into principal roles, principal ranks in major companies. There have only been three black females at the top companies in America,” Carmon said.

Alvin Ailey will continue its tour with visits to cities including South Bend, Ind. and Chicago.

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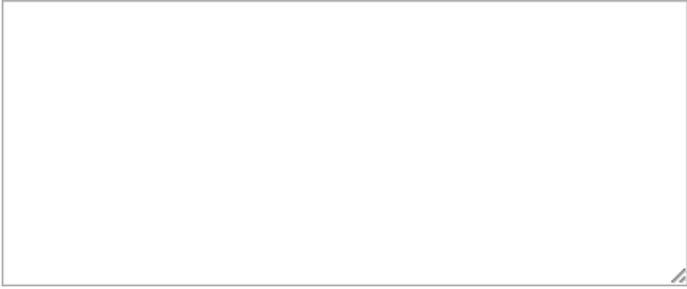
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