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DANCE REVIEW

... Not to Mention the Essence of a West Indian Heritage

Alvin Ailey Company at City Center

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In 1978 the Jamaican choreographer Garth Fagan had an idea for a dance that would explore his West Indies origins. He also wanted to try something new: By stripping away the decorative elements of African and Caribbean dance he aimed to reveal its essence. The resulting [“From Before”](#) is one of Mr. Fagan’s most admired works.



From Before Jamar Roberts of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater leaping into a lead role in the Garth Fagan work at City Center.

On Friday evening at City Center it joined the repertory of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Its polyrhythmic force — both in [Ralph MacDonald](#)’s percussive jazz score and in its invigorating movement — makes for a bracing dance.

Structurally Mr. Fagan resorts to his usual method of pageantry in which dancers move back and forth across the stage as if on a conveyor belt. But his no-nonsense modern dance approach is also nourishing and forces the dancers to be as precise as possible instead of playing to the crowd. “From Before” was originally choreographed for eight dancers. Here the cast is expanded to 16.

With its array of colored unitards and muted lighting the stage exudes the cozy hue of vintage Christmas bulbs or a 1970s Capezio advertisement; it’s like visual comfort food. The leads are Jamar Roberts and Linda Celeste Sims, both in purple. But this is really an ensemble piece; the pulsating action of the group propels the action.

Mr. Fagan’s passion is in creating shapes, and in “From Before” the dancers’ pliés push firmly into the floor as they progress through a labyrinth of contrasting isolations. The fluid gyrations of the hips and sudden twisting of shoulders are independent entities, yet they work in tandem to generate steady streams of movement.

Ms. Sims, holding her arms straight in front of her body and clasping her hands, plants her feet in a wide second position as her hips shake, a motion that travels up to her shoulders. Throughout the work such oppositional movements are fascinating. Legs remain grounded while the liquidity of the torso transforms the body into an elastic band. That push and pull drives “From Before” and shows off Mr. Fagan’s affinity for locating a place of awkward elegance.

The program, which ended with an elegant rendition of Ailey’s “Revelations,” also included “In/Side” from Alvin Ailey’s artistic director, Robert Battle. This pandering solo from 2008 features Mr. Roberts wearing only a pair of black briefs while dancing, full of angst, to Nina Simone’s “Wild Is the Wind.” Spinning his body violently he crashes to the floor, twists his head and opens his mouth in a silent scream. It’s exactly the sort of cliché nonsense that the Ailey company needs to rid itself of, fast.



The program opened with “Night Creature,” Ailey’s 1974 Duke Ellington vehicle, in which the dancers are glorious, hip-swaying beings, though none as radiant as Alicia Graf Mack. This season her remarkable line is captured on the company’s [poster](#), which hangs outside City Center; as she floats in the air, her legs point in opposite directions. “I don’t think that’s real,” a passer-by noted on Friday night. Oh, she’s real — and even better in person.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater continues performances through Dec. 30 at City Center, 131 West 55th Street, Manhattan; (212) 581-1212, nycitycenter.org.

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