



Photographs by BARBARA DAVIDSON Los Angeles Times

DANCE REVIEW

Inner spirit

Alvin Ailey dance company brings nuance and emotional detail to a show focused on brotherhood

BY LAURA BLEIBERG

Brotherhood. There's a word glaringly absent from public mood and discourse. But brotherhood is integral to the work of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and the company has the idea front and center in two pieces that were presented Thursday through Sunday at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts in Costa Mesa.

This multicultural, mostly African American company began its five-show run at Segerstrom with "Exodus," a 2015 hip-hop work by Philadelphia choreographer Rennie Harris. The arresting opening tableau sets up this contemporary obituary: a dark stage littered with bodies dimly visible and a woman (Hope Boykin), trembling with grief, cradling a lifeless man (Matthew Rushing).

But then there's towering Jamar Roberts, slow-motion running to comfort her and revive him. The choreographer has said this shirtless figure is his Prometheus, the mythological god who created mankind. In "Exodus," he is both life-giver and death-deliverer — perhaps a shepherd.

With a recorded score combining fire-breathing original music from Raphael Xavier and "A New Deal" by Norwegian duo Ost & Kjet, Harris gives the 15 dancers intense yet nuanced phrases of infectious complexity. The stage crackles with spirited and imaginative passages, small and large groupings of fast footwork. There's nothing flashy here, no head spins or back-breaking jumps. This is about detail.

The dancers shift from street

clothes to white tunics and loose pants (costumes by Jon Taylor) as Harris transitions them out of their earthbound insanity. And then — bang! — there's a gunshot, and Rushing recoils, down yet again.

In "No Longer Silent," Ailey artistic director Robert Battle takes a modernist, little-known 1925 ballet by Czech Jewish composer Erwin Schulhoff and makes a primitive, ritualistic cry in a world where brotherhood is missing.

Channeling Nijinsky's "Rite of Spring" (or what we know of it from re-creations), Battle sends 18 dancers scurrying in groups, bodies pulled inward, feet heavy on the floor, barreling along some unseen rail, forming intersecting geometric shapes. Sub-groups drop to the floor and roll like tubes. It recalls drill-team exercises raised to the highest level, with Battle making the most of Schulhoff's percussive score and jazz-inspired syncopated rhythms.

Dressed by designer Fritz Masten in identical black slacks and suit jackets, individuals break away for solos expressing terror and suffering.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

When: 8 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Arlington Theatre, 1317 State St., Santa Barbara

Tickets: \$23-\$78

Info: (805) 893-3535, artsandlectures.sa.ucsb.edu

Jacqueline Green is outstanding, longingly lifting one leg and arms overheard simultaneously. Nicole Pearce designed the spot-perfect lighting.

Battle devised "No Longer Silent" in 2007 for one of L.A. Opera Music Director James Conlon's projects reviving works of Jewish composers persecuted by the Nazis. Battle made this piece for students at Juilliard, his alma mater, and transferred it to Ailey last year. It's a great addition.

A mood shift was in order, then, and "A Case of You" delivered. This is a gorgeous duet by Ailey's artistic director emerita Judith Jamison, performed with sweeping emotion by Rachael McLaren and Yannick Lebrun. ("A Case of You" will be on the program when Ailey performs Wednesday at UC Santa Barbara.)

Jamison avoided those maudlin pitfalls and, instead, elegantly captured the poetry in the Joni Mitchell song, recorded here by Diana Krall. Lebrun, in particular, strikingly embodies the wistfulness of the aching lover.

"Revelations" closed the terrific performance Thursday. (The program changes night to night.) Sublime moments mixed with scenes of lower energy. Dancing to the song "Wade in the Water" was unaccountably flat and lethargic. On the other hand, Rushing brought grandeur to "I Wanna Be Ready," and Akua Noni Parker seemed to float in perfect partnership with Jamar Roberts in the "Fix Me, Jesus" passage. Perhaps one day soon, we'll get live singers to go with this piece representing humanity's better side.

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IN "NO LONGER SILENT," top, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater members express terror and suffering, while in the piece "Exodus," above, large and small groups of dancers display fast footwork.