

**A MOVING
MOMENT**
Alvin Ailey dance troupe
thrills in California return
DATEBOOK, B7



**FEINSTEIN WILL
LEAVE KEY PANEL**
Under pressure, senator agrees to step
down from Judiciary Committee
BAY AREA & BUSINESS, A2



**'WE'RE NOT
SCARED'**
Ascendant Kings eager for
showdown with Warriors
SPORTING GREEN, B1

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DATEBOOK

Alvin Ailey Troupe Always a Revelation

By: Rachel Howard

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Alvin Ailey troupe always a revelation



Photos by Paul Kolnik

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater electrifies in Twyla Tharp's "Roy's Joys."

Dance programs in Berkeley showcase unbounded brilliance

By Rachel Howard

It's that time of year when Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's annual visit to Cal Performances shakes us awake.

And with the National Medal of Arts recently bestowed upon the International Association of Blacks in Dance, it's an apt time to reflect on the ways Black companies have historically been pigeonholed in the U.S. by non-Black writers, who not that long ago still lumped darker-skinned choreographers and performers into one genre, "Black dance." It's also worth remembering that, in the decades after Alvin Ailey's early death in 1989, critics (including this one) often tried to narrow his troupe's future, asking what Ailey should be, and what it should dance.

What ridiculously limiting questions. On Tuesday, April 11, at Zellerbach Hall, the virtuosic opening night of Ailey Week answered them firmly and thrillingly: The Ailey company is a collection of extraordinarily versatile movement artists who can dance pretty much anything.

The only disappointment of this visit — the New York-based troupe's 53rd since its first tour to UC Berkeley in 1968 — might be the impossibility of picking only one program to catch. Over six days and seven performances through Sunday, April 16,



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's James Gilmer (left) and Solomon Dumas in Twyla Tharp's "Roy's Joys."

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater: Program A 8 p.m. Friday, April 14. Program B 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, April 12; 8 p.m. Saturday, April 15. Program C 7:30 p.m. Thursday, April 13; 2 p.m. Saturday; 3 p.m. Sunday, April 16. \$42-\$160. Zellerbach Hall, UC Berkeley. 510-642-9988. www.calperformances.org

Ailey is offering three distinct slates, each of them tantalizing.

But I wouldn't trade anything for the sheer luxury and delight of seeing the company in Twyla Tharp's

"Roy's Joys" in Program A.

One of the major figures of 20th century dance who crossed over from experimental work to ballet in the 1980s, Tharp is a surprise and a stretch stylistically on the

company. Though danced in jazz shoes and grounded in Tharp's trademark slouches and shuffles between feats of technical derring-do, this treatment of trumpeter Roy Eldridge's tunes is still, in its way, ballet to the max. James Gilmer, well-known to Bay Area audiences for his past work with San Francisco's ODC/Dance, owns the stage in this, no doubt aided by his
Ailey continues on B12

AILEY

From page B7

earlier work with Tharp for the 2021 program "Twyla Now." But the whole cast of nine shape-shifts between shrugging playfulness and superhuman control with a Tharpian fluidity one hopes would make the famously perfectionist choreographer happy.

What an inspired idea to bring back this unpretentious masterpiece, which premiered in 1997 by Tharp's own troupe but never danced again until Ailey took it up last year.

Costume designer Santo Loquasto's brown trousers and tanks tops are simple, the better to keep focus on Tharp's compositional brilliance. Gilmer and Solomon Dumas have a funny, friendly chest-butting showdown. Jacquelin Harris gets hoisted by two men in tricky partnering until a sudden

death drop has the audience gasping. It all builds to a sigh-inducing duet between Gilmer and Harris that spills over into the interstitial silence. (One of the most slyly pleasing things about "Roy's Joys" is the way that Tharp, like the best jazz musicians, extends her phrasings over musical bar lines and silences.)

The middle section of Program A moves briskly with two works the company also brought to Berkeley last year in its tribute to current Artistic Director Robert Battle. "Unfold," to an aria by the late 19th century French composer Gustave Charpentier (as delivered by the surreal vibrato of Leontyne Price) opens and closes with Ashley Mayeux in a deep, incredibly held backbend, as Jeroboam Bozeman trembles, clutches and slides her across the floor. "For Four," also in Program C, highlights Ashley Kay-

lynn Green at the center of a riffing and sometimes raucous quartet in black suspenders and tuxedo jackets to a drum-fill-laden recording of Wynton Marsalis.

Of course, Program A closed with Ailey's eternally stirring suite of spirituals, 1960s "Revela-

tions," with Christopher R. Wilson, Jau'mair Garland and Patrick Coker delivering a notably fiery "Sinner Man." Compact of frame but dancing big, Coker particularly had the rapid-pirouettes-into-full-layback part down, and he caught some time-bending balances.

But while "Revelations" almost always closes Ailey programs, on this run's Program B, Kyle Abraham's pop-fueled New York season hit, "Are You in Your Feelings?" will replace "Revelations." That program also features the West Coast premiere of

"Duet," a 1964 work by Paul Taylor (an irreplaceable giant of the dance world who died five years ago), proving yet again that today's Ailey is stylistically unbounded.

Rachel Howard is a freelance writer.



Paul Kolnik 2022

Alvin Ailey dancers Jacquelin Harris (left), James Gilmer and Chalvar Monteiro in "Roy's Joys."
