

AILEY brings two world premieres to Boston

By: Susan Saccoccia

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The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater arrives in Boston April 30 for its annual visit, its 58th hosted by Vivo Performing Arts (formerly Celebrity Series of Boston) and its first with Artistic Director Alicia Graf Mack, the fourth artist to hold this role since the company was founded 70 years ago by Alvin Ailey (1931-1989).

This year's tour presents two world premieres: "The Holy Blues" (2025), created by Jawole Wilia Jo Zollar with Samantha Figgins and Chahvar Monteiro; and "Difference Between" (2025), by Boston-born and Boston Ballet School-trained choreographer Matthew Neenan. The company will perform two programs over four days and conclude each performance with Ailey's signature masterpiece "Revelations," an anthem to resilience and joy.

On Thursday and Saturday evenings, the company presents "The Holy Blues" as well as a company premiere, "Blink of an Eye" (2011) by Medhi Walerski, a study of strength and vulnerability that unfolds to J.S. Bach violin sonatas, and Ailey's lyrical solo to a tender Donny Hathaway recording of the Leon Thomas ballad "A Song for You" (1972).

The program for Friday evening and the Saturday and Sunday matinees will present "Difference Between" and a 2025 production of "A Case of You" (2005) by the company's second artistic director, Judith Jamison, a sensual duet danced to Diana Krall's rendition of this Joni Mitchell song; and Ronald K. Brown's rapturous "Grace" (1999) with a score that features Duke Ellington's classic "Come Sunday" and Afro-Pop by Fela Kuti.

"The Holy Blues" takes its title from Ailey's journal, in which he wrote, "My roots are also in... the holy blues — paeans to joy,

anthems to the human spirit."

"The holy blues is a form of music — a genre of the blues that blends the sacred and the secular," Zollar said by phone. "Blind Willie Johnson was a master of holy blues. We use a song of his along with other music spanning two centuries, from recently recorded songs that have been around since enslavement up to music of the '70s."

Its choreography and music conjure the ring shout, a circular dance created by slaves arriving from Central and West Africa; and the Door of No Return, now a memorial on Goree Island off the coast of Senegal, that was a slave-trading port. "The door of no return was not just metaphorical," said Zollar. "It was their last point of contact with the mother continent."

Now artist-in-residence with the Ailey company, Zollar founded Urban Bush Women in 1984 and created 34 works for the ensemble, which uses dance as a catalyst for social change. Developing "The Holy Blues" with Ailey dancer Samantha Figgins and choreographer and former company member Chahvar Monteiro "was a chance to work with people steeped in the Ailey spirit," said Zollar, who finds that spirit compatible with her own.

"In Mr. Ailey's work, storytelling is rooted in the experiences of Black America as well as events common to all of us. We grieve. We celebrate. We find alienation or we find community. All of those things are in my work, just in a very different voice. As a choreographer, I've been interested in the ways people find to survive terrible traumas such as slavery and war and move toward wholeness and community."

In Matthew Neenan's "Difference Between" (2025), a cast of seven dancers moves to music by Drama Desk and two-time

Obie Award-winning singer and composer Heather Christian. Drawing on the jazz and blues of her Southern upbringing, Catholic and Baptist liturgical music and European choral traditions, Christian has said that her works "explore the possibility for the sacred and spiritual in our modern world."

There's so much layering in her music that the dancing is just another added layer," Neenan said by phone. "I wanted to do a whole suite of Christian's music, and Ailey dancers have the right temperament for it. Besides their massive technical talent, Ailey dancers understand how much people love them and they give that back. Doing works over and over in different cities, they always keep the dancing fresh, even within themselves."

Described as "one of America's best dance poets" by The New York Times, Neenan recalls his dance-intensive childhood in Weymouth, nurtured by his older sisters Corinne, who became a Boston Ballet dancer, and Maria, who led a Broadway career.

"We all started at the Boston Ballet School," said Neenan, who as an orange-haired, four-year-old performed in "The Nutcracker" at the Wang Center. "At home, they'd play the piano and I'd make up dances."

Storytelling has a part in "Difference Between" although it is a somewhat abstract work.

"The piece is about those in-between places in life," said Neenan, "transitional moments that can be easy or really hard to get through. I always strive for some kind of through line and consider what poems audience members might write for themselves from what they just saw."

ON THE WEB

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Regé-Jean Page as Michael and Halle Bailey as Anna in "You, Me & Tuscany."

'You, Me and Tuscany' delivers swoon, sass, second chances and a long overdue Black rom-com revival

By OLIVIA GRANT

If escapism had a passport, "You, Me & Tuscany" would stamp it in gold foil, pour you an Aperol spritz and tell you to stop checking your bank account. Produced by Will Packer ("Girls Trip") and directed by Kat Coiro ("Marry Me"), who clearly understands that yearning, chaos and romance pair beautifully with good lighting, this sun-drenched rom-com is as fizzy and indulgent as its Italian setting, and that's exactly the point.

We meet Anna (Halle Bailey), a woman living her best borrowed life. In a delightfully absurd opening she wakes up in a luxe Fifth Avenue apartment, struts out in stilettos and Versace walking a tiny designer dog and pauses to smell the flowers like she's in a perfume commercial. Reality crashes in quickly when the actual owner returns. Surprise: Anna is a professional house sitter... with very loose boundaries. She's wearing this woman's clothes... even her underwear. Yikes!

Within 25 minutes, Anna cycles through a fantasy trifecta: a Fifth Avenue dream apartment, a five-star hotel and a Tuscan villa overlooking rolling vineyards and majestic sunrises. Fired, broke and running on vibes, she charges a \$16 burger to multiple maxed-out cards before meeting Matteo (Lorenzo de Moor), a charming, wealthy Italian who just happens to have an empty villa back home and unknowingly inspires her next impulsive move — a one-way ticket to Tuscany.

Naturally, Anna decides to stay in Matteo's empty villa. Naturally, it's not empty. And naturally, she's mistaken for his fiancée by his family. From there, the film gleefully leans into every rom-com trope in the book and somehow makes them feel playful rather than tired.

There's a sense that this film carries more than just a meet-cute, a misunderstanding and a make-up. It carries hope — hope that studios will continue to invest in diverse love stories ...

Enter Michael (Regé-Jean Page), Matteo's brooding, ridiculously attractive cousin/adopted brother, who looks like he was born to pop corks while shirtless in vineyards. There's a suspicious grandmother, a sly romantic rival, a sassy best friend back home and even a mint-green Fiat affectionately nicknamed "little coccia." Pronounced "koo-chee," the joke lands exactly as intended. There are wine-soaked chases, longing glances and enough sunlit scenery and savory food to make you Google flights before the credits roll.

What's notable about "You, Me & Tuscany" is its cultural significance. Hollywood hasn't exactly been generous when it comes to big, glossy romantic comedies with two Black leads. It's something we haven't seen at the box office since 2012's "Think Like a Man" also produced by Will Packer. That's a genre gap of over a decade for audiences who absolutely deserve to see themselves in love stories that are joyful, aspirational and unapologetically romantic.

This matters. There's a sense that this film carries more than just a meet-cute, a misunderstanding and a make-up. It carries hope — hope that studios will continue to invest in diverse love stories, that Black creatives can thrive in global, big-budget rom-com spaces and that audiences will show up for stories that feel both specific and universal.

Thankfully, the movie delivers where it counts. Ryan Engle's script is breezy and self-aware, never pretending to reinvent the wheel but spinning it with charm. Coiro's direction leans into the fantasy, giving us a full-on feast for the female gaze. This is a movie that knows exactly what it's doing when it frames a certain vineyard scene, and we thank it for its service.

Ultimately, "You, Me & Tuscany" is light, predictable and utterly delightful. It's not trying to challenge you; it's trying to charm you. In a world that often feels a little too heavy, that might be exactly what we need right now.

ON THE WEB

Learn more at universalspictures.com/movies/you-me-tuscany



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Matthew Neenan's "Difference Between."