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Hymn to an Uncommon Man

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OG Anunoby's fingertip putback of Jalen Brunson's Hail Mary three-pointer. Jordan Staal's diving sniper goal. It's playoff season, a time of year dominated by unbelievable, high-stakes athleticism across several sports (see also the French Open, the FIFA World Cup). It can be a hard time, consequently, for regular dance programming. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's quick summer season at the Brooklyn Academy of Music could compete with any sport finals in terms of physical prowess, but the stakes only felt high in one of the three pieces on offer. Luckily, that work was powerful enough to carry the load.

That impactful dance was Judith Jamison's "Hymn," revived for the first time in 15 years. Generally, when ballets take extended naps in the repertory vault, there is a reason. Not in this case. Though "Hymn" certainly reflects its 1993 birth date—it is very much "Revelations" filtered through an early '90s night club—it also feels timeless. Early reviewers said as much. In 1993, Clive Barnes wrote in the NY Post that "Hymn...emerges as the most thrilling piece of dance theatre I have seen all year...Beautifully performed, with power, reverence and love." And in 1996, Jennifer Dunning wrote in the New York Times that "Hymn" was "an eloquent evocation of Ailey that is on its way to being another classic."

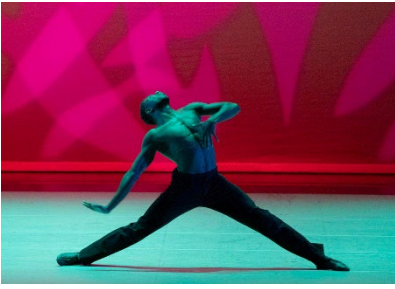
"Hymn" is a unique dance/theater hybrid. Jamison set emblematic Ailey moves to the synth soundtrack of Robert Ruggieri and the voiceover tributes of former AAADT dancers—conceived, written, and recorded by playwright and actress Anna Deveare Smith. To this amalgamation of metallic beats and earnest recollections, Jamison mixed huge unison sections (she wanted the full company involved in this dance, I counted 29 cast members for this revival) and intimate solos—just as Ailey had in "Revelations." The result was both populist and particular. Altogether, the vignettes created a dynamic, yet nuanced, portrait of a man both revered and secretive.

Two sections—"A Head of State" and "The Mask," based on interviews with Sarita Allen and Karine Plantadit, respectively (both were in the audience on opening night)—especially elucidated Ailey's public/private dilemma. As the figurehead of Black dance in America, Ailey felt compelled to remain closeted. He died at 58 of an AIDS-related illness, a fact that was kept hush hush. "Head of State" featured Constance Stamatiou and James Gilmer weaving in and out of the throng. As Allen likened Ailey to a politician and a God, the pair alternately sought out or avoided the roving spotlights (Timothy Hunter did the sets and lighting design).



"The Mask," conversely, was a complicated solo for Caroline T. Dartey to Plantadit's memories of code switching between visits to her grandmother's African village and riding the New York City subways. In voiceover, she explained her perceived limitations of her relatives' Sango language (in which 500 words count for 90% of everyday speech, though the vocabulary is far larger). It frustrated her that the villagers didn't seek out the artistic depths she found in her work with Ailey in America. But whenever she returned stateside, she missed their straightforward presence. Cleverly, Jamison employed some of the most dense and filigreed dance vocabulary in this passage. Though Plantadit's experience was singular, it connected to the larger truth that Ailey was not the only one forced to engage in complicated masking.

In between intimate divulgences like this one, Jamison wielded the full force of the Ailey company to Ruggieri's strong drumbeats. In "Dance," she arranged an exciting canon of partnering on the diagonal—plank lifts, balled hugs, shoulder



hoists. Each time the word “dance” repeated in the score, the women whacked penchés before moving down the line. Elsewhere, she employed spastic “Thriller” walks and funky in-and-out knees in wide second position squats. Churning, African ball-change pulses in the finale were invigorating. I also enjoyed Ashley Kaylynn Green’s forceful turn in “The Search for Perfection.” The tripping on the pronunciation of the word “perfection” in the voiceover was arch, and fabulous. And Yannick Lebrun’s “hiyah” side kicks and matador cape work in “Whores in a Whorehouse Comin’ to Church” were also flashy—and great.

Jamison expertly segued these bold, often euphoric, sequences into softer movements for somber remembrances, as when Patrick Coker led the company in the swirling “Survivor” segment, which recounted the death threats the troupe received on tour. Later, bent-over kneels with hovering eagle arms—one of many “Revelations” quotes—felt hallowed. And when Samantha Figgins held Jesse Obremski’s knees while he slowly hinged to the floor, it was a gender-inverted take on the partnering in the “Fix Me, Jesus” pas de deux. In fact, “Hymn” so often read as a sequel or addendum to “Revelations,” that it was almost redundant to have “Revelations” close out the bill, following Medhi Waterski’s solid but forgettable “Blink of An Eye,” which paired slinky contemporary vibes with Bach’s cyclic strings.

Overall, the troupe gave a clutch “Revelations” performance. “Sinner Man,” which can often get too wild, was impressively tight in the hands of Coker, Obremski, and Isaiah Day. But in other sections, the dancing was so clean that it undermined the theme of struggle. Lebrun has done the “I Wanna Be Ready” solo for a long time now, and he didn’t wobble at all in the tricky ab work and tilted promenades. Choreographically speaking, he was ready and waiting. And Corinne Rachelle Mitchell and Christopher R. Wilson were so coolly smooth in “Fix Me, Jesus,” that it could have been a Balanchine duet. The hand tremolos didn’t seem like involuntary spasms so much as aesthetic flourishes.

Coming from the Balanchine tradition, I always prefer honesty to overemoting. And “Revelations” is a masterpiece that can weather various interpretations. But on this night, the troupe seemed more invested in “Hymn.” It had the bigger energy, and it would have been the better closer. This was Artistic Director Alicia Graf Mack’s inaugural season. She was wise to resurrect “Hymn” after all this time; hopefully she will keep it in play. Who knows why it fell out of fashion to begin with, but it could certainly rotate in for “Revelations” to give the dancers a breather from their signature dance.

Perhaps, in addition to the novelty of it, the dancers’ enthusiasm for “Hymn” stemmed from the fact that not only did it feel timeless, it was also timely. At the beginning and ending of the work, Ailey’s voice boomed through the house, while a spotlight shone on an empty stool. In closing, Ailey said: “dance came from the people, and it should always be delivered back to the people.” This language, which echoes the U.S. Constitution and the Gettysburg Address, was particularly ripe as the Semiquincentennial approaches. Given the current polarization of the country, it also feels subversive. And many brave artists have been leaning into the rebellious aspects of the nation’s foundational tracts lately: from Bruce Springsteen to former AAADT dancer Jamar Roberts, who’s politically charged “We the People” helmed the Martha Graham Dance Company’s recent centennial celebrations.

At the top of “Hymn,” Ailey spoke of the “blood memories” that informed his artistry (his emotional legacy from growing up in the segregated rural South)—and most famously, “Revelations.” I thought of Bill T. Jones’s solo “Memory Piece: Mr. Ailey, Alvin...the un-Ailey”—made for last year’s “Edges of Ailey” exhibit at the Whitney Museum. In this moving dance, Jones processed his own blood memories while recalling his interactions with Ailey. He realized that Ailey’s lofty status prevented Jones from truly knowing him as a person. “Hymn,” chipped away at the same barrier. “Hey Al! Hi Al,” laughed one former dancer as she tried to imagine how she would address Ailey as a buddy.

But then, “I don’t want to get shot onstage!” emphasized another, before committing to performing in hostile cities nonetheless, after realizing that those threats were the very reason that the troupe needed to exist. They were also part of the reason that Ailey kept up his mask. Throughout “Hymn,” Jamison, Deveare Smith, et al contrasted personal vulnerability and symbolic strength. The fierce, showgirl line changes in the finale were apt: “show it, hide it” could’ve been a company mantra. Yet, in the beautifully balanced “Hymn,” even as the dancers exalted their leader, they also exposed his humanity—often through sharing their own blood memories. And these are the kinds of revelations America needs more of right now.