

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater + Les Ballet Jazz de Montreal in LA

Sarah Elgart · Wednesday, April 15th, 2015

This week there are two live dance events converging upon Los Angeles that should not go unnoticed: The Dorothy Chandler Pavilion presents the seminal Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (April 15-19), and Canada's contemporary Les Ballet Jazz de Montreal (BJM Danse) comes to the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts (April 16-18). In many ways these two visionary companies could not be more different in terms of their signature styles, and yet there is perhaps more common ground than first meets the eye.

Since 1958 the Ailey Company has performed for an estimated 25 million people worldwide and since 2008 they have been designated "*a vital American cultural ambassador to the world*" by a US Congressional resolution. Pivotal in their integration and celebration into dance of the African American experience, this year Ailey is presenting an eclectic line up which includes their well loved classic **Revelations**, as well as selections by internationally renowned contemporary and classical choreographers including Aszure Barton, Christopher Wheeldon, David Parsons, and Ohad Naharin. But a piece about and named after **Odetta** – one of the twentieth century's most acclaimed singer-songwriters and a civil rights activist whose music was part of the background score to my childhood, was what really caught my eye. I finally saw her live almost twenty years ago when she performed at Cathedral Saint John the Divine as part of a program to honor a dear friend, the then outgoing Very Right Reverend Dean James Parks Morton III. It was New Year's Eve and Odetta sang live, amidst a sea of lit candles raised high, her powerful and moving voice reverberating against the stone pillars and gargoyles of that magnificent space. Unforgettable.



Ailey's Hope Boykin in the central role of Matthew Rushing's "Odetta" (Photo by Steve Wilson)

I had a chance to speak to Matthew Rushing, the acclaimed "dancer, mover and shaker" who became the choreographer of **Odetta**, and asked him how the piece came to be: "*Last year Mr. Battle (Robert Battle, Artistic Director of Ailey) approached me, called me into his office and asked me if I knew who Odetta is. I said well 'Yeah, I know who she is.'*" He said 'Well, I would like for you to create a ballet that celebrates her music and her life.' But it wasn't until I started the research that I realized how important this work was."



Rehearsal Director and Guest Artist Matthew Rushing.
(Photo by Andrew Eccles)

I asked Matthew if recent events such as the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, or the killing of Trayvon Martin in Florida had influenced his work and his process: *“I wanted to do this piece to introduce Odetta’s music of course, but also a little background on her life, and her music... That was my goal. Then I was putting the piece together and a lot of these social things were happening. I was putting this section together about John Henry (the African American Folk Hero) and I wanted to represent the weight that black men have to carry, as far as breaking down social stereotypes. I was letting the dancers know that black men have this responsibility to persevere and to push through.”*

When Rushing was doing research, he came across a children’s book about Odetta’s life written by a man by the name of Stephen Alcorn, who had been a very close friend of hers. Matthew had begun to envision having set: *“I didn’t want this just to be a suite of music with dance, I wanted to enhance the visual experience. I thought about putting together different environments. I wanted some projections of images and he (Alcorn) came up with the idea of images supporting sections that were conceptual... That were adding to but not interpreting. I was more inclined to be literal and it was so great to be with him because he extended my whole vision of the piece.”*

With 11 dancers and two casts this is one of Rushing’s biggest and most important works to date as a choreographer. And what is particularly special about him presenting here in LA is that he is an LA native and graduate of Los Angeles County High School of the Performing Arts (LACHSA).

Like Ailey, Les Ballet Jazz de Montreal (BJM Danse), founded in 1972 by Geneviève Salbaing, Eva von Gencsy and Eddy Toussaint, employs the works of internationally renowned contemporary choreographers, like Rodrigo Pederneiras, Crystal Pite, David Parsons and also Azure Barton to name a few. While I categorically dislike categorizations, the company’s name is misleading, leaving one wondering is it ballet, jazz, contemporary, or all of the above? When I caught up with Artistic Director Louis Robitaille he was in a cab en route to the airport for his flight to LA, and asked him just that: *“It’s a contemporary ballet company,”* he said. *“It was a jazz company 43 years ago. The name hasn’t changed, but the style has. It’s more of a fusion dance company with ballet style as foundation. We still jazz the ballet style but it’s definitely not a jazz dance company any more.”*



A dancer in “Rouge” with BJM Danse

This is eminently clear from the trailer (see below) for **Rouge**, one of the works to be presented this tour. I asked Robitaille what he hopes LA audiences will walk away with:

“Each choreography has its own signature, but overall I believe that it’s the energy that is the main thread throughout the evening. The kind of energy that only allows you to win, that allows you to overcome obstacles, a kind of drive that you can find in each piece of the evening. BJM is like something contagious that will maybe inspire people to leave the theater with a goal to go further in life or elevate themselves. If people will forget their problems for two hours maybe we did not do so bad.”

And if the trailer is any indication, that shouldn’t be a problem.

You can find tickets to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Les Ballet Jazz de Montreal here:

Ailey: musiccenter.org/about/Our-Programs/Gloria-Kaufman-Dance/14-15/Alvin-Ailey/

BJM Danse: tickets.thewallis.org

Enjoy!

BJM ROUGE TEASER from Ballets Jazz de Montréal on Vimeo.

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