

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Power of Ailey

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, April 15th, 2015

The opening night program of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion showcased four pieces from the repertory, and affirmed the company as America's premiere dance troupe. Collectively entitled *Power of Ailey*, the evening featured *Episodes* with choreography by Ulysses S. Dove, *Caught* with choreography by David Parsons, *Uprising* with choreography by Hofesh Shechter, and Ohad Naharin's audience-participatory *Minus 16*. It was a night of pathos and magic.

In *Episodes*, dancers in pairs and trios execute leaping near-misses, repeating gestures of reaching and repulsion. How much do we want connection? Enough to embrace each other in arcs of muscle. How much do we fear it? Enough to float away from a partner on point, without even wearing toe shoes. Facing toward and away from each other in John B. Reade's diagonal runways of light, the full troupe finally materializes on stage. As the music stops, they face each other and the relationships they have made and lost. That's when realization sets in: all the connections they missed while they were creating their drama.

Kirven Douthit-Boyd is the solo dancer in *Caught*. Shirtless with simple white pants, he stands in a pool of light. Then in a gasp, as the stage goes black, magic begins. A strobe light flashes. On the formal level, this work is simplicity itself: a man and flashes of light. But O, what magic. The strobe's flashes catch Douthit-Boyd mid-air, moving across the stage. You believe a man can fly. Our persistence of desire reinforces our persistence of vision, because we want magic to be real. That's the meaning and paradox of this piece — the moments when light catches him are moments of flight, of purest freedom. The choreographer seems to ask, How much of freedom depends on brutal selectivity, such as seeing only seconds of an entire leap? How do constraints, such as the simple elements of *Caught*, keep us free?



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Kirven Douthit-Boyd in David Parson's *Caught*. Photo by Rosalie O'Connor

Uprising, unlike the first two pieces, is full of loose muscles and dangled limbs. It begins with seven men on stage, men who are troubled but cannot fully express their anger. One begins to raise his fist, and another man brings his arm down. After a blackout, as we watch the men prone on the ground, backlit, their silhouettes twitching, one cannot help but see Trayvon and Eric and Levar and all the others. #blacklivesmatter

What happens to raised a fist deferred? Maybe it just sags like a heavy load; there is a long, static

section where the men stand motionless and slowly collapse to the ground, then pick themselves up, only to fall slowly again. One man remains on the ground, his forehead inclined on the stage, his right arm raised in a fist like a promontory from the earth. Then they gather in a circle and begin to struggle with each other. What keeps us from rising up? The answer is ourselves. The solution comes at the end, in a heroic tableau with red flag aloft, a mashup of Soviet Realism, the Paris barricades of the July Rebellion, and American marching band flourishes. It's the only questionable moment in the piece, because it suggests false optimism. The raised fist deferred doesn't turn itself into a meme. More likely, it explodes.



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Ohad Naharin's *Minus 16*. Photo by Paul Kolnik

The evening concluded with *Minus 16*. A semicircle of twenty company members enact a repeated grammar of conformity and the struggle with it. They throw off articles of clothing, arch their backs, raise their arms, fall back, chant a lyric, and repeat, repeat, repeat. Then, dressed again, approaching the apron like zombies, they break the fourth wall and descend into the audience, pulling patrons onto the stage with them. Here the choreography becomes especially brilliant, because the dancers make the civilians look great. With whoops of delighted joy from the supportive house, twenty audience members dance on stage. At the end, one audience member remains, center stage. As in an elemental theatre, she has come dressed for the part, in black pants and a red tunic, set off against her white mane of hair.

It is ideal stagecraft, all the more perfect because of its unpredictability, and proof that the democracy of movement can make magic real. Yes, everybody's got some dance in them. Power indeed.

Read Sarah Elgart's interview with choreographer Matthew Rushing.

Top image: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Hofesh Shechter's Uprising. Photo by Paul Kolnik

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