

**Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater**  
**Program A: *Deep, Walking Mad, Ella, Revelations***  
**Program B: *Night Creatures, Cry, Untitled America, Exodus***  
**Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley, California**  
**March 14 and 15, 2017**

It's hard to believe, but the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has been presented annually by Cal Performances at UC Berkeley for nearly fifty years. I first saw the company in New York City around the same time the company first appeared here and I have continued to keep my eye on it in the forty years I've lived in San Francisco. To watch this troupe over such a span of time has been an education in the evolution of the repertoire, dancers and directors.

The Ailey company is currently dancing at a very high level and its artistic director of six years, Robert Battle has made some astute choices for new repertoire which only serve to highlight the performers' excellence. The ballets on this program, with the exception of *Revelations*, are all Bay Area premieres.

The evening begins with Mauro Bigonzetti's *Deep* to a selection of recorded music performed by Ibeyi. As the sixteen dancers group together and then split off to form quartets, trios and duos of all gender combinations, the dynamics between dancers keep shifting. The sculptural quality of the choreography, arms and legs in surprisingly skewed planes, is its best asset, while the frequent use of unison movement quickly becomes a liability. All the dancers bring an urgent intensity to their roles with special nods to the outstanding Jamar Roberts, Jacqueline Green and Glenn Allen Sims.

A number of years ago Nederlands Dans Theater brought *Walking Mad*, choreographed by Johan Inger for that company in 2001, to the Zellerbach stage. I remember thinking it was a fun piece, but it seemed more gimmicky than serious. The Ailey troupe shows it's possible to dive deeply into it, creating many touching moments which cause the total transformation of the ballet. Scenic and costume designer Inger's moveable wall is taken apart and reassembled into new spaces and props, and the zany costumes – trench coats and bowler hats among others—spice up the action. Yet there is an undercurrent of serious human emotion at play that grows as the piece progresses, thanks in large part to Rachel McLaren, Jacquelin Harris and Renaldo Maurice whose emotional authenticity is so compelling.

*Ella* was created as a solo by artistic director Battle in 2008, before he took the helm of the company. In a new configuration, it's a tour de force for two dancers – two women, two men or one of each depending on which night you see it – to the voice of Ella Fitzgerald singing "Airmail Special". A good thing it is short, like its title, because the dancers would drop from exhaustion if it went on any longer. With a live singer it would have been much better, but even the live recording of Fitzgerald outshines the choreography.

On the following night, the only Bay Area premiere is Kyle Abraham's *Untitled America*, which actually could have been more appropriately called "Unentitled America" because it deals with the impact of the prison system on African Americans. Abraham deserves credit for addressing one of the major social injustices of our times. Despite his long list of awards and critical acclaim, I find his work is still underdeveloped and lacking a clear choreographic voice.

Perhaps as he matures he will find a way to express the ideas that are in his mind through movement phrasing and spatial relationships. For the moment he relies too heavily on the recorded voices of prisoners describing the damage done to separated families and the lyrics of songs. As they say about writing for the theater – “Show, don't tell”. It also applies to choreography. The expressive and talented dancers deserve more; they produce miracles – water from the stones and blood from the turnips that Abraham has offered them.