

Alvin Ailey brings a revelation to Zellerbach

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The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater returned triumphantly to Zellerbach Hall on Friday with a rich panorama of works designed to drive the audience to a frenzy. Dancers and dances did just that, and this first of three different programs was a feast of American dance.

First came the most recent, Lynne Taylor-Corbett's 2002 "Prayers From the Edge." It is a gloss on the Romeo and Juliet story, danced to Peter Gabriel's throbbing "Passion." There is an evocative, primitive atmosphere in Taylor-Corbett's world, divided into gold and red tribes dressed to match by Judanna Lynn. The opening "Prayer for Power"

introduces the two camps as one intrudes on the other's water-gathering with aggressive chains of tight-fisted jumps, Grahamesque contractions and ritualistic marches. Inevitably, a girl from one tribe falls for a boy from the other, tragedy ensues, a "Prayer for Peace" brings the ballet to a close.

The psychology of "Prayers" is not profound, but the choreographer has found a way to add a sensual counterpoint to the rhythms of Gabriel's music and make it seem like more than New Age background. There was real virtuosity at Zellerbach: in the superb Matthew Rushing's "Prayer for Rain," in Asha Thomas' generous presence, in the spirit of communities divided expressed so clearly in the ensemble. There was also real sweetness, in heart-rending performances by Linda Celeste-Sims and Clifton Brown as the doomed young lovers.

Ohad Naharin's "Black Milk" followed. The Israeli choreographer originally made it in 1984 for the women of the Kibbutz Dance Company, so it is a giddy jolt to experience his 1992 revision for Ailey as a testosterone-driven, beefcake-in-skirts ballet for five men. It, too, is a ritual, in this case of sharing a bucket: first of war paint, then of cleansing water. Paul Smadbeck's score, an attractive Philip-Glass-lite affair, is deceptively constant: The mood of the dance moves subtly from enigmatic smiles to decidedly serious frowns as the group changes purpose. Brown, Rushing, Jeffrey Gerodias and Glenn Sims were uniformly impressive. Jamar Roberts, as the man chosen by fate to be the first to purify his body at the end, was beautiful.

It is difficult to believe that "Treading" was Elisa Monte's very first dance, but the 1979 duet, costumed by Marisol and danced to a recording of Steve Reich's ever-fascinating "Music for Eighteen Musicians," remains a precocious and lovely dance. Brown partnered Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell in and out of the penumbra of Beverly Emmons' lighting. The crowd went wild.

The best came at the end, and the theater exploded with cheers throughout the performance, with Ailey's "Revelations." Made in 1960

and at least as fresh as anything choreographed anywhere today, Ailey's greatest work is a Mass as much as a ballet, a celebration of life's mysteries danced through the primal rhythms of black spirituals. Just the first few moments of "Pilgrim of Sorrow" offer so much of Ailey's revolutionary dance syntax, the flexible bodies one with the music, the extended downcast arms that suddenly rise as the dancers take flight like eagles toward the sun. The piece felt new Friday night. It always does when these dancers are on, and they always are in "Revelations."

The only drawback at Zellerbach, and we are sadly getting used to it, was the canned music. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has one of the finest musical directors in the business: Tania Leon, a major conductor as well as an exciting composer. We never get to hear her work in the Bay Area, just as we never get to experience the thrill of live singers inspiring the dancers in anything from "Fix me, Jesus" and "Wade in the Water" to the life-affirming "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham."

The realities of today's economy unavoidably necessitate these and other artistic compromises. But, just once, couldn't Cal Performances hire a good choir from a church in the East Bay? Perhaps for a benefit, or just to remind Ailey's many fans here of the full impact of this American masterpiece? That would be a revelation.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater: In three programs including dances by Ailey, Lynne Taylor-Corbett, Francesca Harper, Ohad Naharin, Carmen De Lavallade and Ronald K. Brown, in repertory through March 2 at Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley. Tickets: \$26 to \$48. Call (510) 642-9988 or visit www.calperfs.berkeley.edu.

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