

Prismatic

“Suspended Women”
Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater
New York City Center
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by Marianne Adams
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Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater’s premiere of Jacquelyn Buglisi’s 2000 work “Suspended Women,” carefully wedged between the no longer new for the company “Chroma” and the classic “Revelations,” offered a moving glimpse of the atemporal elements of the female experience, and the evening’s program as a whole provided a perspective on the company’s artistic dimension.

Buglisi’s ballet was her first work to enter Ailey’s repertory after she’s been teaching at the Ailey School for over 20 years, and in the words of artistic director Robert Battle before the evening began, was a “way to welcome Buglisi into the Ailey family in a different way.” And what a welcome it was.

From the outset, the fifteen women that drifted on stage to Daniel Bernard Roumain’s interpolations on Maurice Ravel’s “Piano Concerto in G Major” were as distressed and beautiful as the period dresses in which they were clad. Their countless stories were concealed in the elegant folds of the dancers’ restrained movements, and they took turns to tell them in small solo phrases and by intermittently staying still, spinning and falling.

Buglisi’s intent with the work was to present the commonality of the female experience over time, the struggles, challenges and strengths, and certainly unity and sisterhood as well, and the Ailey dancers proved to be an excellent vehicle for that expression. The depth of emotional range of the cast made their experiences seem real and ever-present: even when the women were standing in one spot, treading ground but not going anywhere, their eyes betrayed deep hidden narratives.

The choreographer’s history with the company’s dancers, some of whom she’s known since their time at the school, must have helped make the ballet more nuanced and personal, adding to its softness and otherworldly feel. There was emotional richness in the overall work and the details of the more descriptive scenes: the all-consuming mourning as they carried “dead” women off stage, the caring comfort as they cradled each other in enveloping arms. The beautiful costumes with layered and hooped skirts by A. Christina Giannini served not only as the anchors for the representation of the women across the time periods, but also as props, as the dancers expertly maneuvered them left and right, sometimes violently, sometimes gracefully, leaning away from the skirts, dropping to their knees surrounded by their folds, all adding to the particular expression of the dance’s passage.

The entrance of four men on stage introduced the aspect of the work that touches on the complexity of gender relations. One man reached to wrap his arm around a woman, but by her throat not her shoulders, transforming the move from protective to violent and sparking alarm in the woman’s eyes even if her movements offered no resistance. Later the men would carry women onstage from the wings in different poses, some looking comfortable, some not, as though carried against their will; one of the women appeared twice as tall as everyone else as a result of a full body lift, her long dress concealing the man supporting her, making her look like a queen. Duets had romance and rejection, with one leaving a woman on the floor looking at a mesmerizing dancing couple with despair. At the end of the ballet, the men walked through the rows of women, taking off their jackets and offering them to women with varying degrees of care. The conflicts embedded in the piece remained unresolved, but now felt more personal and intimately familiar.

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