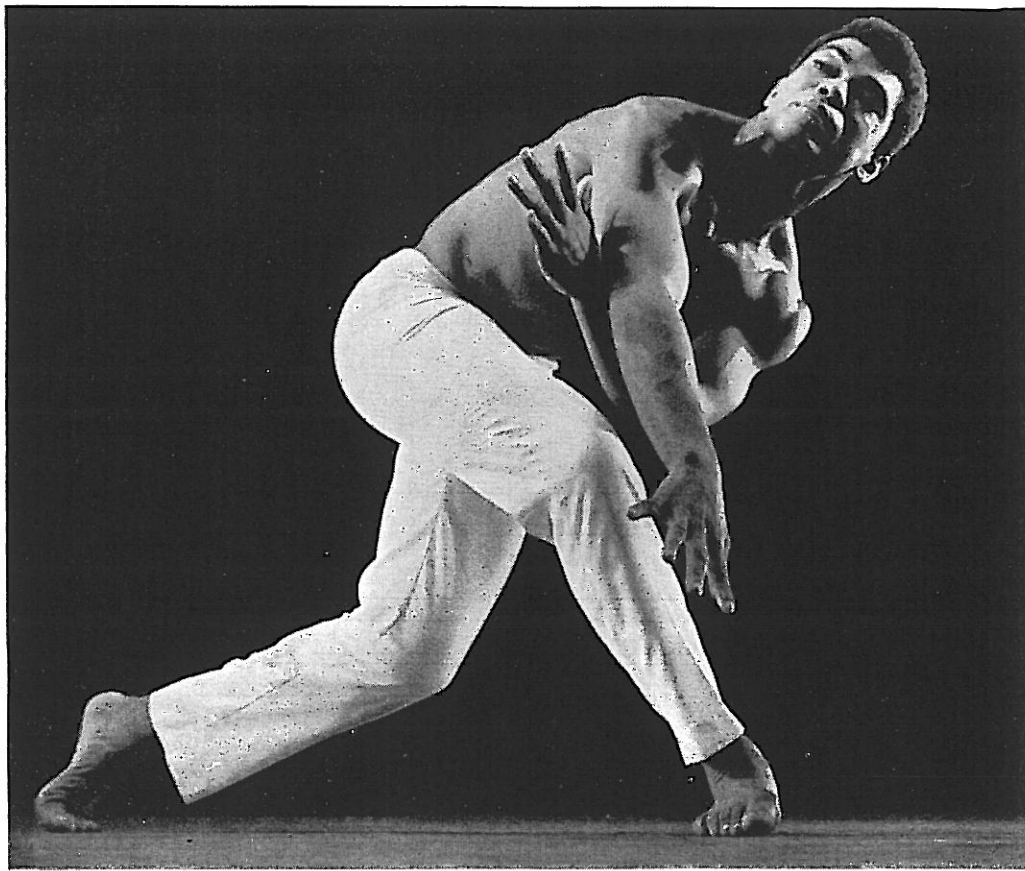


WHEN THE ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE Theatre visited London last autumn they gained many admirers as well as a large following. Further appreciation was shown when the company managed a return visit in March. Unfortunately the season was a brief one of only eleven days as their visit was sandwiched between an Australian and a continental tour. The Saville theatre has a good stage for dancing and suited the company's presentations, but it is a large auditorium to fill. One naturally associates this theatre with Martha Graham's first London season and the excellent ballets she displayed there. Alas the auditorium was sometimes as empty for Ailey as it was then for Graham but by the last few performances—again, as with Graham—the public “got the message” and the theatre was full.

In many ways the return visit of Ailey has been more outstanding than his previous season. The aims of the company are in Ailey's own words: “To combine our own dance forms with instrumental music, song and acting techniques and to express various dramatic themes and moods. This is what



The photograph above of Alvin Ailey in *Revelations* was taken by Zoe Dominic

The Splendid Alvin Ailey

I mean by Dance Theatre, and since American culture has developed from many sources, our programme is based on a variety of materials representing many influences”.

Ailey has kept his word, for several new works were presented by choreographers new to English audiences. This policy of Ailey's shows a far reaching mind, for, brilliant choreographer as he is, he has not built his company's repertory on his own talents. The policy of a one-man company is an egocentric fault which has in the past marred many dance companies both modern and ballet.

The major work in the first programme was Anne Sokolow's *Rooms*. Choreographed over ten years ago, this ballet has been considered a landmark in American modern dance. Perhaps one expected too much, for it proved to be over-long and the initial impact began to diminish. Anna Sokolow bases many of her works on themes dealing with man's inability to communicate; in *Rooms* she presents eight people, living in tiny one room apartments in which they live out their nightmares, dreams, fears and anxieties. They pass through life without ever seeing, hearing, speaking or touching each other. Some episodes were brilliant—the man sparring and laughing to keep up his courage; the three dreaming girls doing a kind of barre, supported by their chairs, as they gaze over the rooftops—but others were too long and there was an overall similarity of pattern in the emotional impact.

To sustain this type of personal drama for forty minutes is a difficult undertaking, and the danger in this type of ballet is that, although there is a recurring theme, the ballet becomes a series of episodes only brought together by the opening and finale. The choreographic conception was, however, interesting and showed another approach to modern dance. Miss Sokolow takes the natural movement in gestures and re-actions and upon this builds the dance movement. She once said that a choreographer “must think, feel fierce and fight”—and this she certainly does with her characters.

Much praise should be given to the dancers in this ballet as no gestures were overdone or stylised: in this type of movement exaggeration can so easily become a weakness. Choreographically the dance movement was thin compared with that of Ailey's work but the completely natural approach made it an impressive work of dance creation. There was a reliance upon the tensions and relaxations produced by the body for which the modern dancer is so well trained and which this company shows so superbly.

Another new work to London was *Lament* by the negro choreographer Louis Johnson. First produced in 1953 it was the first ballet Johnson created and one wonders how he has developed in the intervening years for, as a first essay in choreography, it is brilliant. The work is a lyrical study in grief shown by a girl when her young man

has been claimed by death (or could this be too simple an interpretation?). It is a simple theme shown often before (one remembers Howard's *Death and the Maiden*), but here told with imaginative choreography to the mood of the haunting Villa-Lobos music. Johnson uses his dancers to flow from movement to movement, in contrast to Miss Sokolow's underlying tensions. It is this very wide and expressive movement found in modern dance which makes it so fascinating a dance form.

Hope Clarke and William Louthier were very moving as the couple and they both gave beautifully sensitive performances. Later in the season the part of the man was danced by Dudley Williams, another excellent dancer, and the role of the girl by Georgia Collins. She is a newcomer to the company but was disappointing as an artist as she seemed to lack the right quality, and at times had very uneven phrasing.

In the second programme the opening ballet was *Congo Tango Palace* by Tally Beatty. This is an excerpt from a longer work called *Come and Get the Beauty of it Hot*. It was a tempting morsel to show and it whetted the appetite with regard to the whole work. Set in an imaginary ballroom in Spanish Harlem, four men and four girls present a series of dances based on Spanish and Jazz movements. The scene opens with a dozen chairs rising crazily from the ground towards the ceiling to form a lovely setting, this to the accompaniment of a trumpet played rather in the style as at the start of

a bullfight. The choreography tells no story but is more a study in brilliant dancing: quick, tense and exciting in its approach. It was interesting to see this fragment of Beatty's work together with his *Road of the Phoebe Snow*, which was in the same programme. Beatty is a choreographer of tremendous power and skill whose strength lies more in his group work than in his individual solos or pas de deux (at least so far as one can judge from the two works shown here). *Phoebe Snow* still remains an impressive work, bitter and beautiful, and it was beautifully danced.

Ailey's new contribution, *Hermit Songs*, was a strange one. To four religious poems, set to music by Samuel Barber, he has devised solo interpretations for one dancer.

This is one of Ailey's early works and in a way his ballet *Revelations*, which is set to spirituals, has been a further development from this approach. William Louther was the dancer in the role of the monk and his work was excellent, showing line, control and elevation, together with a very moving expressive approach. The choreography was reminiscent of one of the early Graham works with its strong fluent line and the use of the floor and battements. It revealed an



William Louther in *Hermit Songs*, photographed by Anthony Crickmay.

interesting side of Ailey's development. The music was recorded and the soprano (surprisingly) was Leontyne Price: her voice seemed unsuited to the songs and subject matter. In the ballet *Lament* a soprano voice was used but this expressed a feminine approach as well as the thoughts of the dancer; a soprano voice associated with the emotions of a monk seemed completely artificial. Song accompaniments to ballets present their own problems: for instance when Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* (Tudor's *Dark Elegies*) is sung by a baritone, the conception is quite different from when it is sung by a contralto.



The photograph above is of James Truitte and Georgia Collins in *Revelations* and the one below of Ailey himself in the lovely 'Wadin in the Water' number from the same ballet. (Photographs by Roland Bond.)

The last two dances in *Hermit Songs* were performed against a colour design thrown on a backcloth, lurid and reminiscent of glorious technicolour finales in films. This was unfortunate as the lighting up to this point had been dramatic and solemn.

The rest of the programmes were made up of ballets seen here before but still highly enjoyable. The popular, marvellously constructed *Revelations*, in which James Truitte dances so eloquently; Dudley Williams' beautifully danced *Reflections in D*; and *Gillespiana*, all works by Ailey, fully reveal the artistic merit of this wonderfully co-ordinated company. They generate so much beauty and excitement it is difficult to believe there were only ten of them!

The music throughout was recorded and one missed Brother John Sellars from the previous season. Also greatly missed were the two dancers Joyce Trisler and Takako Osakawa. Possibly it is now Ailey's intention to have an all Negro company, and certainly all nine soloists danced brilliantly throughout the short season. One was filled with admiration for the verve and attack that they brought to all the ballets shown. Their quality, together with the expressive use they make of the entire body, makes the classical ballet training seem restricting. Nearly all these dancers have had ballet training as a basis and yet when a ballet movement is introduced it immediately creates a wrong note and appears to be out of context. The two forms of dance complement each other in training but merge happily on the stage only when completely integrated.

A quality greatly to be admired was the dancers showed the different styles required by the various choreographers. In modern dance, as was shown this season, there are many individual approaches although every company will have a style of its own. Similarly, the Royal Ballet shows its versatility in the way it dances works by Ashton,

Balanchine or Fokine, although inclined to subject these works to the basic English style.

The lighting and staging of Nicholas Cernovitch throughout the Alvin Ailey season was memorable. No scenery was used, yet with a few props and lights a distinct atmosphere was created for each ballet by his imaginative work.

This second season will prove, perhaps, more memorable than the first as Ailey introduced to us new choreographers who have shown the possibilities contained in modern dance. He has also shown us the achievement of his policy with regard to a dance theatre. It was an important event for everyone who cares about the art of the dance and one that should not have been missed. Unfortunately, as the empty seats testified, there are still too many purists who cannot see beyond a fifth position.

