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Impressions of Dance Theatre of Harlem's 2014 New York Season

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By Henning Rübsum View Profile | More From This Author Published on May 8, 2014 Photography: University of Utah

They could have danced all night (but not on Saturday afternoon)

45th Anniversary Season April 23 - 27, 2014 Frederick P. Rose Hall/ Jazz at Lincoln Center Performances: Saturday, April 26, 2014 2:00pm / Saturday, April 26, 2014 8:00pm / Sunday, April 27, 2014 3:00pm

It was Dance Theatre of Harlem's second year at Jazz at Lincoln Center after a near nine-year hiatus. Lead by its former prima ballerina turned artistic director, Virginia Johnson (who was founder Arthur Mitchell's muse) the company rightly belongs in this big a venue. The Columbus Circle location is especially fitting since it is an express stop on the famous A-train, which, after all, is still the quickest way to Harlem.

The way to Harlem was a central theme in this season's premiere, past-carry-forward by choreographers Tanya Wideman-Davis and Thaddeus Davis. An old photo projected on a gauze curtain, mirrored in tableau by the company, came to life once it faded and the dancers sprang into action. Beautiful and evocative imagery of the migration from South to North: of flappers, of Harlem Renaissance, of segregated military, added up to more than one story, more than one work could contain, and ultimately more than one could take in.

While some sections were joyful and made use of the stage with space-devouring steps, most of the ballet contained meaning-laden gestures that escaped definition. Yet certain images stayed with me and would like to see the work again, to either find the through-line or enjoy the disjointed scenes. Not every work explains itself on first viewing and once you enlist a dramaturge (Thomas F. DeFrantz) things are bound to get complicated. The music by Willie "The Lion" Smith, the costumes by Charles Heightchew and the lighting by Peter Jakubowski and Peter D. Leonard are enough reason for me to want to take another peek.



DTH's Da'Von Doane and Ashley Murphy in past-carry-forward. Photo: Rachel Neville

After the first piece I saw in my three-performance DTH weekend, starting with a Saturday matinee, I was, however, almost ready to throw in the towel. A disastrous performance of Pas de Dix opened the program. Petipa must have rolled over in his grave. While the principal couple (Ashley Murphy and Da'Von Doane) got through most of their assignment with aplomb, the rest of the cast should not have been allowed on stage.

Thankfully one's faith in DTH's use of the classical idiom was restored in the very next moment, since the pas de deux from Swan Lake took flight and even soared. Nayara Lopes fought to finish her multiple fouette turns and her battle paid off. Beyond that she is a musical and animated dancer with grace and poise and was able to convey a character. Partnered by the elegant Samuel Wilson, a stylish prince with an appealing mixture of panache and wonderment, she made her joy in dancing palpable. Another cast of Pas de Dix on Sunday afternoon led by Chrystyn Fentroy and Francis Lawrence fared much better with the corps work and featured the lovely Ms. Lopes in the second variation.

Robert Garland's New Bach from 2001 received two very different treatments as well. While Lindsey Croop on Saturday afternoon seemed stiff and Fredrick Davis did not physicalize the humor, but mugged his way through the piece in an overbearing manner, the evening cast featured the crisp and athletic dancing of Ashley Murphy and the intelligence and wit of Samuel Wilson.

Garland is such a musical choreographer that he sometimes follows the notes doggedly, but apparently there is enough freedom in the material for a dancer to syncopate and make what seemed only ornamental in one performance into a physical expression of exalted giddiness. The corps de ballet looked fine in both casts.



DTH's Da'Von Doane and Ashley Murphy in Dancing On The Front Porch Of Heaven. Photo: Rachel Neville

Speaking of fine: the acquisition of Ulysses Dove's Dancing On The Front Porch Of Heaven was a good move. The work, which premiered in 1993 and is subtitled Odes to Love and Loss, is a heartfelt and heavy yet hopeful work. The dancers look well-rehearsed even though I wish for more conviction or physical truth in some of their gestures, but I am confident that the fine dancers, who are committed to the material, will soon get there. A male pas de deux is the emotional highlight of the choreography set to the much overused music by Arvo Pärt. The cast included: Emiko Flanagan, Chrystyn Fentroy, Ashley Jackson, Francis Lawrence, Fredrick Davis, and Anthony Savoy.

What I had been looking forward to since I had seen it first during DTH's season last year, did not disappoint. Donald Byrd's masterpiece Contested Space rocked the house and rocks my world. It is a ballet of this century. Seeing it the second time around with a largely different cast made me see other details. All of them dark yet delightful. I believe some changes have been made, but maybe some of the material just looks new because it is performed by alternate dancers. For a detailed description see: http://www.dance-enthusiast.com/features/view/Dance-Theatre-of-Harlem-Impressions-2013-04-17

This year's stellar cast featured Stephanie Rae Williams, Chrystyn Fentroy, Alexandra Jacob, Emiko Flanagan, Ingrid Silva, Dustin James, Samuel Wilson, Fredrick Davis, Anthony Savoy, and the mysterious and powerful Francis Lawrence. What a phenomenal work!

The season closed with Robert Garland's Gloria, a fitting celebration that included some students of Dance Theatre of Harlem's vibrant school. The future looks promising.



DTH in Gloria. Photo: Matthew Murphy

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