

DANCING

## DEVOTION

*Star turns at the Alvin Ailey Company.*

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

Ronald K. Brown, the most acclaimed choreographer now working with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, was born in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn in 1966. He knew from childhood that he would grow up to be a dancer. When he was six, he took lessons sponsored by the Police Athletic League. For a second-

age of nineteen, he founded his own dance company, Evidence. Soon, like other young African-American choreographers, he was travelling regularly to Africa to work with its dance companies and to soak up its arts. Hence the basic components of his style: African traditional and popular dance and music, plus American modern dance and club

religious base. "Grace" (1999) shows a group of people ignoring the operation of grace in their lives—and just dancing fabulously. Then, on Sunday (the dance is bracketed by performances of Duke Ellington's "Come Sunday"), they rediscover their faith—indeed, if I'm not mistaken, they die, exalted and forgiven. "Serving Nia" (2001) finds the ensemble in Heaven, honoring three forms of "purpose"—or, in Swahili, *nia*. Now, for the Ailey company, Brown has made "Four Corners," which the troupe is currently performing in its City Center season. The title has to do, in part, with the four corners of the world, where, in the Book of Revelation, angels will appear on Judgment Day, holding the four winds of the earth before unleashing



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grade black-history assignment, in which students dressed up as inspirational African-Americans, he wore a white T-shirt and black tights, the costume that Arthur Mitchell had worn in his most famous role, in Balanchine's "Agon." Brown also spent a summer studying with Mary Anthony, a celebrated teacher of modern dance. At the

culture. In 2000, he told Melanye White Dixon, of *Attitude* magazine, that he and his friends liked to go out to clubs at 4 A.M. and dance for five or six hours.

Another important source of Brown's work is religion. His family was devout, and he is loyal to their beliefs. Practically every piece I have seen by him has a re-

ligious base. This sounds dire, but the title was also inspired by a set of lyrics that Carl Hancock Rux derived from the Book of Revelation, and which accompanies a section of the piece. "Stand," Rux tells the angels and, it seems, the earthlings. "You are beautiful and lovely."

Brown says that what he does is

"storytelling," but, as this list of works suggests, the stories are getting less clear—more mixed, more ambiguous. You have to read the press release to find out what's going on. I'll be damned if I saw four corners in "Four Corners." Twice, by my count, four dancers moved in unison in a square formation, but this was no more remarkable than if four fairies had done it in "The Sleeping Beauty." And other kinds of patterns—solos, trios—were more common than quartets.

Not just religion but also Africa seems more absorbed—suggested rather than flat-out portrayed—in Brown's recent work. He has said that, because he has worked repeatedly in Africa, he has no need to romanticize his roots, or to claim old-country authenticity for his new dances. This has given him time, instead, to concentrate on the dancing. Between whatever bookends he chooses—a prayer dance in "Grace," angels with winds—he supplies what I believe is the most impressive West African-based dancing to be seen in New York today.

The dances occur mostly in small groups—duets, trios, quartets—that break out from the ensemble and play in counterpoint to one another. This is exciting, but more exciting is the dancing that each individual performs. As always with the Ailey company, I try to look at the stars, and then some young person comes onstage and I can't look away. This time it was Belen Pereyra, age twenty-six. I don't recall ever noticing her before. On the night, this season, when I first saw "Grace," I could not believe Pereyra's speed, her spontaneity, her astonishing, open-legged jumps. It was like watching a baby or an animal—movement that is completely natural, but which, in an adult, is the product only of art and long training. You look at her pas de chat *en tournant* (high-legged turning jump) and you think you're going to burst into tears. There are no theatrics here, no pushing, no look-at-me, but merely dance as it might be done without an audience.

The Ailey company's senior dancer, Matthew Rushing, is, to me, the very epitome of forcefulness without pushing—indeed, *because* of not pushing. Rushing has spent twenty years

with the troupe. After becoming a rehearsal director, in 2010, he sat out a European tour. He says that his body couldn't take it anymore. (The Ailey company has the longest touring schedule of any American company.) Then he returned, but as a "guest artist," which seems to mean that he can pick his roles and his schedule. Again and again, he is featured in the first cast of a new dance. Two weeks ago, the company staged a program called "Celebrating Matthew Rushing." They clearly want to keep him.

To me, the ideal age for a dancer, on average, is thirty. Rushing is forty, but he is not the average dancer. He has breathtaking speed, by which I do not mean that he can run across the stage fast, but that he can go almost instantaneously from one position to the next, so that you don't have to look at some blurry business in between. The two qualities, apart from character and technique, that are most important in a dancer are phrasing, as with any musician, and clarity. From the moment Rushing joined the Ailey company, he shone in both departments. In addition, he has a sweet smile, sparingly deployed (normally, he wears a quizzical expression), and his big back sweats up handsomely in performance. But his most sterling virtue—strangely, for so great a dancer—is modesty, or proportion.

This is a critical issue. The troupe had always been primarily a men's company, and in the past the men have often sold the work hard—big grins, big kicks, big indifference to gradation. (Ailey had danced on Broadway, and he liked pizzazz.) I asked Rushing what, as a rehearsal director, he found himself having to work on the most, and he said, "Dynamics. Dynamic range"—in other words, how to go from soft to loud, little to big, and back. The same has been said of Ron Brown's coaching. In the words of the Ailey veteran Renee Robinson, Brown "would always tell us to pull back a bit, and trust that the feeling would take us to the shape." Both men are asking these superbly trained dancers to let go, a little bit, of their technique, or to let it serve *them*. That's how we get a dancer like Belen Pereyra. The lesson is being learned. ♦

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