

DANCE REVIEW

Winds gust into rare 'Form'

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The world-renowned Alvin Ailey troupe is generally more loved for its dances' spirit - and always for its magnificent dancers - than for the dances' form. But in the two promising premieres this year, the architecture stands out. It doesn't merely contain the work, it participates in the meaning and power: A welcome development.

"Existence Without Form," by Minneapolis choreographer and former Ailey dancer Uri Sands, begins as a drama of wind and stones, momentum and mass. It's thrilling as long as it stays that way.

The curtain rises on seven dancers with their backs to us - faces aren't going to matter here. They fan out across the stage and take turns tilting like individual shafts of wheat in the wind, then tumble in succession to the ground as if that wind were skimming over a whole field, leaving a path in its wake. The movement - crook-legged jumps, rolls and turns - remains plain enough to keep us focused on the force behind it.

Time slows as Asha Thomas and Jamar Roberts move with earthen amplitude along a diagonal, like a single, molten sculpture of lovers.

In the end, though, Sands is defeated by the multipart score, as are many choreographers. When composer Christian Matjias turns from piano waves (much like George Winston's sleepy-time "Seasons") to choral passages, Sands introduces a forest romp: The dancers are wheat and trees no more. By the time they return to emulating natural elements, we've tuned out.

Veteran choreographer Karole Armitage has some difficulty choosing the kind of drama she wants. Before the New Yorker left for more than a decade in Europe, she was famous for a spiky classicism. You can see its remains in the opening pas de deux of the premiere, "Gamelan Gardens": A woman wields her legs like a whip. The duet demonstrates little conviction in the battle-of-the-sexes conventions it trots out, and soon Armitage abandons this tack.

With Lou Harrison's gorgeous "Double Concerto for Violin and Cello with Javanese Gamelan" as her guide, she delivers an underwater dreamscape free of angles and ego.

The pear-green velvet curtains by artist David Salle that serve as wings hang all the way from the high ceiling; the mind floats up. In lines and wedges that bloom by means of musical round, the dance feels like flowers blossoming, bouquets slowly tossed: a perfumed and languorous heaven.

Armitage has been aiming for ephemerality with depth for some time, but her compulsive injections of coy personality have held her back. This time, she succeeds. Perhaps because she isn't familiar with these astounding dancers, she sublimates the person to the dance. She adheres to her hero George Balanchine's practice. "Romanticism you can get from God," he once said. "My business is to show you form."

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER. Premieres by Karole Armitage and Uri Sands. Season continues through Dec. 31 at City Center, West 55th St. between Sixth and Seventh avenues. Tickets \$25-\$110. Call 212-581-1212 or visit www.alvinailey.org. Seen Dec. 3 and Friday.

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