

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Paul Kolnik

Invitation to Joy

by Ellen Miller

The curtain opens on *Century*, choreographed by Amy Hall Garner, to reveal a shimmering gold backdrop. Garner choreographed *Century* to celebrate her grandfather's 100th birthday, and a celebration it was, complete with big band music and shoulder fringe. The high energy piece was the perfect opening—glorious and filled with delight. That energy was infectious, rippling around the audience packed into the Academy of Music.

As the ten dancers spun around the stage, there was a playfulness present, both in costuming – the fringed sleeves of the men's costumes to the women's fringed skirts and boleros layered over candy-striper leotards – and movement, in powerful jumps and flexed feet. All dancers were bare legged, making the power behind the movement incredibly visible as their thigh muscles flexed to propel them. Dancers jabbed their arms out with flat palms, their clear intentionality creating perfectly straight lines. No movement was accidental, and transitions were carefully planned, including a notable exit where the women crab-walked sideways offstage.

The theme, a reference to Garner's grandfather's earliest decade, shone in the 20s inspired costuming and music. The cheery horns captured a joy on stage – and in the audience, as the woman wearing a beret in the row in front of me bobbed her head along to the music. Freedom materialized on stage, with women ditching their character shoes and boleros as the dance went on, and the lighting changing the backdrop from gold to fuschia.

In a solo, a tall dancer began dancing to spoken word as someone (the grandfather?) muses about how they're doing ok; they're still here. He navigated the stage with audible, intentional breath, a signature that reminded me that Garner has also worked with BalletX. As he finished, approaching the front of the stage, he hit his chest with one hand and raised his arm above his head, and from behind me, I heard "yeeeeees."

The tempo increased, the band returned, and the dancers reminded us that dance can be fun! A celebration, even. Audience members broke out into applause mid-piece over a particularly impressive jump, and during bows, a woman behind me cheered individually for [each performer](#).

The second selection, *Following the Subtle Current Upstream*, originally choreographed by Alonzo King in 2000, couldn't have been more different. Three dancers wearing black tops and forest green velvet shorts entered. They began the dance to a soundtrack of singing bowls and thunder. They pivoted around the stage, in sync but not identical, executing flawless attitude turns, each facing a different direction. A single dancer entered, and they all stopped in different poses, offering him their attention while he soloed. It was a pretty piece, and the audience was quieter as they absorbed the shift. Ahead of me and across the aisle, a kid's light-up sneakers signaled a few times before they drew their feet into the row.

As always, the company closed the show with [Revelations](#), Ailey's [seminal work](#). In *I Been 'Buked*, the dancers' arm movements were perfectly precise. Their outstretched arms, elbows slightly bent and pointed to the ceiling, jerked upwards in canon, and there were quiet "yes's" from the audience again. In *Wade in the Water* the audience energy began to shift. When we reached *Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham* there was tentative applause throughout, as if a number of audience members could not decide when the right moment to begin the rhythmic clap was. This tentativeness reminded me of the last time I saw *Revelations*, when the older white women sitting in my row cast disapproving glances at the older Black man verbally and physically praising the dancers. I've reflected often in the year since about the inherent whiteness built into audience norms in the performing arts. About what is considered an "[appropriate](#)" reaction and how that differs from space to space, how often we can be hesitant to express praise or look down on others who don't hold their applause for the expected moment, about the ableism and classism that have shaped that space.

As the dancers started to clap, the audience was quick to pick it up. By the encore, we were clapping along and cheering, some audience members dancing in the aisles as the kid with the light up shoes waved their *Rocka My Soul* Alvin Ailey [souvenir fan](#) proudly above their head. As we continue to fight for increased diversity on stage, we should also be fighting for the privilege to show up fully in the spaces we inhabit as audience members, embracing the joy offered so freely from the stage. More quiet "yes's" and more dancing in the aisles, please!

[Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater](#), Ensemble Arts Philly, February 23-25, 2024.

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