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The Rhythmically Ebbing and Flowing of the Subway Riders of New York

By JENNIFER DUNNING DEC. 10, 2007

Is the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater setting a trend? Both of its premieres this season are light and relatively frivolous. Fredrick Earl Mosely took on legends of the American West in his new and atypical “Saddle Up!,” And Camille A. Brown celebrates the captive community of New York subway riders in her delicious “Groove to Nobody’s Business,” first performed by the Ailey company on Friday night at City Center.

Ms. Brown has shrewdly observed that scene in a flowing series of vignettes about the city and its subway riders. Set to music by Ray Charles and Brandon McCune, the narratives unfold beneath oddly stylized but ingenious city and subway settings designed by J. Wiese. In the first of two sections Matthew Rushing is an impatient, comically hapless rider who only wants a seat and a little peace and quiet, none of which he gets. In the second section Glenn Allen Sims’s snooty newspaper-reading businessman deals with subway riffraff but does not triumph.

Two feisty young lovers (Linda Celeste Sims and Guillermo Asca) sprawl across several more than two seats. A truculent toughie (Hope Boykin) is not about to take any guff from anybody. There is a frazzled middle-class lady with a purse (Renee

Robinson), a lumbering youth (Malik Le Nost) and a man (Kirven J. Boyd) with a soggy, persistent cold. A snazzy young woman (Olivia Bowman) seems to be tripping on more than the subway.

Ms. Brown opens “Groove” with marvelously dogged cross-stage trudges and then lets train-riding behavior take over, as far as movement is concerned. There are no abstractions here, and a lot of quick-passing bits of business, like the businessman’s almost undetectable wince when an innocent rider passes close enough to be a mugger. Ms. Brown’s choreography is both expressive and economical — no words needed.

The program also included Ailey’s “Night Creature,” with Alicia J. Graf spicily sensuous in the lead female role, and Elisa Monte’s “Treading,” a modern-dance classic that deserved the roar of approval it received as the curtain fell on Friday. The duet, to music by Steve Reich, is a warm, primeval ooze of lovemaking. An unbroken golden thread of a Kama Sutra exercise for dancers, “Treading” requires sustained physical strength and delicacy, both of which it got from Ms. Sims and Clifton Brown as the lovers, each exuding a shining clarity that made the duet into something exalted. The program was completed by Ulysses Dove’s “Urban Folk Dance” and Ailey’s “Revelations.”

One quibble: How about more vignettes in “Groove”? Mr. Rushing’s small, determined mouse of a character got off the subway way too soon. What happens to the others? And why not a “Treading” with same-sex lovers? Now that would be a groove.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs through Dec. 31 at City Center, 131 West 55th Street, Manhattan; (212) 581-1212 or alvinailey.org.

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