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## Breathtaking Feats of Footwork From a Master Choreographer

MONTCLAIR, N.J. — Even 30 years ago, it was evident that the modern-dance choreographer Richard Alston was the foremost European dance maker after Frederick Ashton. Others — Pina Bausch, Matthew Bourne, Kenneth MacMillan — might qualify as the foremost European makers of dance theater, but when it came to the core business of building steps and movement into dances, Mr. Alston has long been in the lead.

In the ballet world too, the composition and phraseology of individual dances from this century's best choreographers, Alexei Ratmansky and Christopher Wheeldon, do not equal Mr. Alston at his best. His quality, like that of all of those mentioned above, varies, but the triple bill his company is presenting this week as part of the Peak Performances series at Montclair State University's Alexander Kasser Theater is superb throughout.

America may take some credit for his barefoot idiom; he studied in New York in the mid-1970s with Merce Cunningham. And no other choreographer since Cunningham has made so powerful a use of the instep and the spine. When I first saw Mr. Alston's work in London in 1978, he was still working independently of music, in the Cunningham manner, though, even then, his use of falling off balance was quite unlike Cunningham's.

Though he made masterpieces then, the finesse of his dance composition has grown. Mr. Alston — who, like George Balanchine and Mark Morris, reads music — has become one of the most musical of all choreographers.

This Montclair program includes an American premiere of rare beauty and excellence, perfectly addressing this time of year and marvelously chosen for an American performance by a British choreographer: "A Ceremony of Carols." Its music was composed by Benjamin Britten as he sailed home to Britain from America during World War II.

During its course, there emerge poignant hints of both Jesus' crucifixion and the Virgin Mary's travail in his birth (in that order), but the work is far larger than those specifics. A study of community, ritual and worship, the multifaceted work poetically elicits a wide range of feeling.

Even more remarkable is Mr. Alston's 2011 Mozart work, "Unfinished Business." The title derives from the music: Mozart wrote the first two movements of his Sonata in F (K. 533) independently of the finale, which had been composed earlier. Here Mr. Alston supplies a different finale, Mozart material that was arranged for the piano by Ferruccio Busoni in 1909, the "Giga, Bolero e Variazione." Many will recognize the music in this Busoni piece: It combines Mozart's Giga (arranged by Tchaikovsky in his fourth orchestral suite, "Mozartiana") with the Spanish dance that makes so spine-tingling a contribution to Act III of "The Marriage of Figaro."

Few choreographers have the subtlety and craft to bring off a Mozart dance — Mr. Alston, like Balanchine and Mr. Morris, has sometimes failed — but this one succeeds. The first movement's development of melodic ideas leads to an alternation of solo and ensemble. The soloist is Liam Riddick, who, like Pierre Tappon in the finale, shows a springing footwork, rhythmic intricacy and pliancy of torso

that make both men the latest in a long line of Alston male virtuosos that goes back by way of Henri Oguike (in the 1990s) and Michael Clark (in the early 1980s) to Tom Jobe (in the 1970s).

The second movement is even better. A duet astonishingly sustained for more than 10 minutes, it is danced by Elly Braund and James Pett, fluently and beautifully conveying an extraordinary mutuality seldom seen in American dance: here the woman takes the man's weight; there the man takes the woman's; now both dance the same steps and hold the same lines, with a conversational give-and-take that sells us no agenda about how men and women should cooperate but simply exemplifies complex and lyrical courtesy.

In this century only Cunningham has made duets as compelling as this, but the tradition that Mr. Alston expands on here is that of the duets Ashton made for Antoinette Sibley and Anthony Dowell from 1964 to 1983 (still stylistically advanced today). We see how much man and woman have in common (not least in shared physical line) — and our notion of both sexes is extended by the grace of their dialogue.

In the third movement, the solo danced by Mr. Tappon to the Giga does not pale even beside Balanchine's quite dissimilar male solo to the same music in his 1981 "Mozartiana"; with higher energy and covering more space, it brings out the same quality of subversive eccentricity in the music.

Mr. Tappon, whose feet give him a sensational liftoff in jumps, is strikingly assertive, a mold breaker; Mr. Riddick, a quieter personality who returns to the stage in the third movement, has compelling grace and physical dexterity.

With all the dancers here, footwork is thrilling. The amazing speed of sideways hops, the explosive power of forward-traveling temps levé steps (jumps from and to the same foot in which the raised leg opens with force equal to that of the hopping one), and the linear grace with which one toe is placed by the knee of the other leg (retiré) change your breathing while you watch.

These virtues, like the wonderful freedom with which the torsos bend, distinguish the program's opening and most exhilarating work, "Roughcut" (1990), an Alston classic to two Steve Reich pieces (the 1986 "New York Counterpoint" for clarinet and tape, and the 1987 "Electric Counterpoint" for guitar and tape). I love the sensuousness with which Alston reveals the music's shifting colors. Buoyant dances for Mr. Tappon and other men to birdsonglike clarinet, and intricate duets for Hannah Kidd and Mr. Riddick to soft guitar are among the many moods of this complex ensemble work.

Another of the evening's virtues is its use of live music in two works. With the pianist Jason Ridgway onstage for the Mozart/Busoni, you can see the play between him and the dancers. For "A Ceremony of Carols," André Tarantiles plays harp in one corner of the stage, and the entrance and exit of the all-female Prima Voce singers make an eloquent theatrical contribution to this marvelous premiere. There are several recordings of this great Britten piece, but to hear its sonorities in live performance gives them a new dimension.

This program continues through Sunday at the Alexander Kasser Theater, Montclair State University, 1 Normal Avenue, Montclair, N.J.; (973) 655-5112, [peakperfs.org](http://peakperfs.org)

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