



*First-nighters applaud speeches at inauguration of renovated Wiltern Theatre.*

## GALA OPENING, INCONCLUSIVE SHOW

# AILEY AT THE 'NEW' WILTERN

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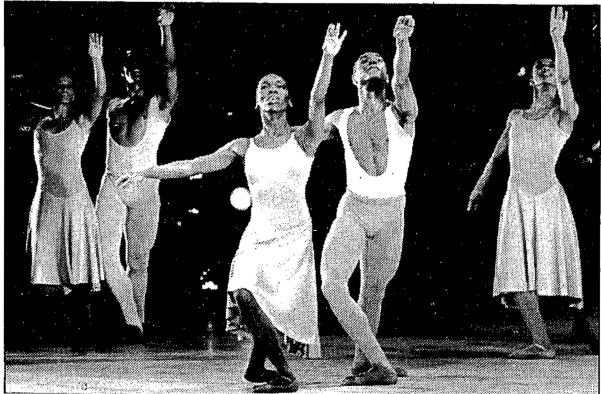
The ads promised an 8 o'clock curtain. The tickets said 8:30. The orgy of self-congratulatory speeches involving politicians and benefactors began just before 9. The curtain finally rose on a full, four-part dance program at 9:15. It was that sort of a night.

Luckily, most of the dressy, rose-toting audience didn't seem to care. The revelers had come to participate in an Event.

This was the gala reopening of the Wiltern Theatre, a wonderfully garish movie palace built 54 years ago and now refurbished, to the tune of \$5 million, as a hopeful haven for the loftier muses.

The natives were restless Wednesday. Many fled the 2,375-seat emporium as the too generous performance ground onward if not downward. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater held the stage, *con brio*, but for those who stayed the real show seemed to be taking place out front. The social

*Please see AILEY, Page 16*



Members of Alvin Ailey ensemble dance Wilson/Gershwin "Concerto in F."

## AILEY TROUPE AT WILTERN

*Continued from Page 1*

brouhaha in the lobby during the extended intermissions tended to overpower the terpsichorean pizzazz framed by the most ornate proscenium this side of Radio City Music Hall.

The Wiltern has come a long way since Oct. 7, 1931, when it opened its opulent doors for a program that enlisted William Powell as master of ceremonies, George Arliss on the screen as Alexander Hamilton, and Albert Hay "Master of Melody" Malotte—composer of the "Lord's Prayer" and "Ferdinand the Bull"—at the mighty organ.

The mighty organ, alas, has been removed in the interim. But, for most other practical purposes, the theater, now an official cultural landmark, has been improved.

The stage and pit have been enlarged. The chandelier in the foyer rotunda has been restored to its former glitter. The ubiquitous plaster relief, the gold leaf, the metropolitan sunburst on the auditorium ceiling, the tile extravaganzas, the kitsch sculptures, the lushly stylized paintings, the rippling frosted-glass facades, all glow now with a muted, florid freshness.

The house is a marvel, or a monstrosity, depending on how one happens to regard Art Deco excess in the cool, understated air of the '80s.

In either case, the "new" Wiltern is a place to see. Whether it is a place in which ballets and operas should be seen and heard remains to be seen and heard.

With new chair placed directly behind new chair on the rather flat auditorium floor, the sightlines afford a great view of the head in front of one, and a not-so-great view of the stage. Building a rake may have been financially prohibitive. Still, one must wonder if anyone thought of staggering the seats.

The soundlines remain a mystery at this juncture. Thanks to some artistic mogul's infinite wisdom, the expensive new pit was not used Wednesday, and the dancers didn't happen to indulge in much singing. Canned music was blasted mercilessly at the audience through loud and primitive loudspeakers as if this were a rock 'n' roll endurance contest at the Fillmore East. One live, sensitive, musician—Johana Harris-Heggie—did make a surprise appearance, playing Mendelssohn's "Songs Without Words" as accompaniment for Hans van Manen's ballet of the same name. From a seat at the center of the 17th row downstairs, the piano tone sounded suspiciously big and mushy.

Under the given socio-aesthetic circumstances, Alvin Ailey may have been wise to offer an inaugural program without novelty and, thank goodness, without the commercial glitz that has marked much of his recent output. In characteristically gutsy form, the Ailey ensemble breezed nicely and often neatly through Billy Wilson's "Concerto in F" (1981)—a faithful, Robbinsesque translation of Gershwin's classical rituals and jazzy accents. Van Manen's "Songs" of 1982 still seem a bit too cutesy for their moonstruck, romantic source, but one continues to admire the basic lyricism and the fluidity of the choreographic maneuvers.

Ailey provided two of his own golden oldies at the end of the evening. "Cry" (1971) has passed from the definitive, willowy body and searing spirit of Judith Jamison to Donna Wood. Incidentally, we learn—with some apprehension—that the devastating solo will be divided among three other protagonists the next time we see it, on Sunday. "Revelations," Ailey's calling-card ode to the spiritual, *anno* 1960, sent the devout home happy near midnight.