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A Singer, a Dancer and the Art of Effortless

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Two things were incontestable about the 11th-anniversary opening gala of the Complexions Contemporary Ballet's week at the Joyce Theater on Tuesday night: Nina Simone was one extraordinary singer, and Desmond Richardson is one extraordinary dancer.

It was Mr. Richardson's solo, a world premiere called "Showman's Groove," that provided the key for me, at least, to unlock the appeal of Dwight Rhoden's choreography.

There are times when Mr. Rhoden's dances, which constitute all the choreography for the week with the exception of William Forsythe's "Approximate Sonata," can look hectic and overwrought. The extended excerpts from "White," the middle movement of his evening-length ballet "Anthem" (the others are "Red" and "Blue"), looked that way to me.

But then came three short pieces, two duets flanking Mr. Richardson's new solo. The first duet, "Sweet Low Rise," got off on the right foot, so to speak, with one of Simone's cranky solos, which as usual combined guttural assertion with fastidious vocalism. And the dance turned out to be a pretty telling limning of a complex man-woman relationship, from violence to teasing to tenderness.

Mr. Richardson's solo once again revealed his amazing body, his endless arms and legs, his winsome movement asides, his overpowering charm. Mr. Rhoden has spent a professional lifetime making dances for that body and that dancer. Lesser dancers, even the superior ones in the Complexions ensemble, have a hard time putting the same choreography across as effortlessly as Mr. Richardson manages to do.

But once I had the image of Mr. Richardson dancing in my brain, I began to see more of what Mr. Rhoden was about in his other pieces. Mr. Rhoden and Mr. Richardson emerged together from the Alvin Ailey company, and their dancing represents a supercharged version of the Ailey vocabulary. Without consummate style, it can look like mere hard work.

The last short dance, "Ave Maria," is a more stylized duet than the first, freighted with lugubrious music lugubriously arranged. But with the concluding "Pretty Gritty Suite," or 8 of its 11 movements for the gala, all that energy paid off, buoyed by a sequence of fabulous Simone recordings. The dancers even began to look as good as Mr. Richardson. It surely sent the gala audience off to its gala dinner in a happy frame of mind.