

## When Ballet Plays Footsie With Hip-Hop

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ATLANTA — “Big,” the Atlanta Ballet’s new production, features a live performance of the music of [Antwan Patton](#), better known as Big Boi of the famed hip-hop duo [OutKast](#). Clearly the aim is to expand the ballet company’s audience. But it’s far more likely that “big,” which opened on Thursday night at the Fabulous Fox Theater here, will bring ballet audiences to hip-hop. (I, for one, am going to download as many songs by OutKast as possible.)



And that, from a dance point of view, gets to the heart of the problem with the rambunctious, rambling, hugely enjoyable concert that is “big.” As the title indicates, it’s all about Mr. Patton: his inventive, unpredictable music; his smart lyrics; his persona; his stable of artists. And as hard as Lauri Stallings, the ballet company’s resident choreographer, has tried to match his starry presence with a veritable onslaught of kinetic, charged dancing, it’s an unequal alliance. At best, “big” has moments of fascinating intersection between the movement and the firecracker verbal delivery of Mr. Patton’s work. At worst, the dancers simply look like a rather sophisticated back-up troupe.

Trying to bring ballet into the contemporary world by yoking it to a contemporary idea, be it music or narrative, isn’t a new idea. But, with rare exceptions, the results are usually excruciating. (Ballet can’t achieve modernity by association, only by an extension of its own physical laws and principles.)

“Big,” however, is not the least bit excruciating. Ms. Stallings mostly steers clear of the contrived juxtaposition of two worlds — dancers on point behaving like nightclubbers on amphetamines — to which most of these ventures fall prey. And her style, strongly influenced by the explosive, geometric movement of Ohad Naharin, is often fascinating to watch in its unpredictable, propulsive dynamics.

But much of the time, it takes a concerted effort actually to watch the movement in “big.” The piece is made up of 23 musical sections, most dominated by Mr. Patton; his fellow singers (among them Sleepy Brown, Joi Gilliam, Big Rube, Janelle Monáe and Khujo Goodie); and the sheer, heart-thumping volume of his impeccable band in the orchestra pit. Against this star power, electronic power, video projections (by Adam Larsen) and

the size of the enormous Fox Theater (a truly fabulous, neo-Moorish creation that seats more than 4,000), the 33 dancers have little chance of prevailing.

Occasionally they do. In “Nine,” set to Mr. Patton’s “Kryptonite,” five women move with slow, deliberate, jutted pelvises, legs stretched out in balletic reach, arms angling through space. Ms. Stallings resists matching the music’s hypnotic beat, and the contrast between the tough, eloquent lyrics; the pounding rhythms; and the formal, strong dancers is suddenly compelling. The golden-voiced Ms. Monáe performs a sly, stiff-bodied duet with Tara Lee. (Mr. Patton, a fluid mover, doesn’t attempt any such thing.)

But “big” is mostly a mish-mash of too many ideas and too much material. A loose narrative offers an adorable small boy (Kameron Davis) as a younger incarnation of Mr. Patton, led by a guiding spirit (Ms. Lee, perfect in this part). Forty children, also part of the show, are charming. There are many marvelous costumes (by April McCoy), some a cross between ballet tutus and 18th-century underwear. There are flashing lights (by Howell Binkley), smoke and dancers flying through the air on harnesses.

But “big” is big, and the hip, cheering and wildly diverse audience on Thursday night is undoubtedly what the Atlanta Ballet’s director, John McFall, had in mind when he suggested the collaboration to Mr. Patton. Television crews, bling, encores, an after party ([Queen Latifah](#) hosting!) — ballet doesn’t usually enjoy so glamorous a life. Let’s embrace the party spirit while we can.

“Big” will be performed on Saturday and Sunday at the Fabulous Fox Theater, 660 Peachtree Street, Atlanta;(404) 817-8700.