

# Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

## Dance review: 'ABBEY: In the Red' rich with Pittsburgh talents, soulful jazz



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It's rare when you find a project that so beautifully illuminates the talents of a rich Pittsburgh artist collective as in "ABBEY: In the Red," now on view at the August Wilson Center for African American Culture, Downtown, through Saturday.

It seemed to have started with Stacey and Herman Pearl, an East End power couple who have rediscovered a pearl of their own in vocalist, songwriter, actress and civil rights activist Abbey Lincoln.

Not familiar to the world at large, she nonetheless received a National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master Award and worked with many other greats in the field. For eight years she was married to drummer extraordinaire Max Roach, a significant note for this particular program.

“ABBEY” focused mostly on the singer’s early work in one of her greatest albums, “Straight Ahead” (1960), and collaborations with Roach in “We Insist!” and “Percussion Bittersweet” (1961).

But this didn’t feel like music from the ’60s, as the artists reimagined and paid homage to Lincoln. Thanks to Ben Opie’s skillful arrangements, the jazz felt avant-garde as it picked apart Lincoln’s songs and put them back together in a fresh and vastly interesting fashion.

The musicians, here labeled The Red Band, were gathered with a decidedly lower range, with Paul Thompson on bass, Elisa Kohanski on cello and Ben Barson on baritone saxophone, although he reached new heights along the way. Mr. Opie soared above them on soprano, alto and tenor saxophone, although the arrangements allowed for vibrant solo work from all. Mr. Pearl, aka Soy Sos, not only provided electronics but expertly channeled the likes of Roach with complex rhythms that dazzled.

This oddly spare but wonderfully fertile combination of voices built the platform for one of Pittsburgh’s consummate singers, Anqwenique Wingfield. She was framed by organic sculptures on the sides and beautiful silk scarves overhead, all illuminated by Scott Nelson’s evocative lighting. And she looked like an African queen in a cloud-like turban and plush caftan and sounded like jazz royalty in songs like “Freedom Day,” “African Lady” and, of course, “In the Red.” It was a spectacular environment provided by designers Atticus Adams and Tereneh Mosley of Idia’Dega.

Born out of pain and suffering, bolstered by a growing social conscience, the songs said one thing. But the dancing, performed primarily by six dancers from the STAYCEE PEARL dance project and with occasional support from The Legacy Arts Project, did another.

Ms. Pearl returned to her Alvin Ailey roots in a big way. The current configuration of her dance project just might be her best, with dancers capable of performing exciting movement. The traditional modern vocabulary, from slumping backs to attitude turns to airborne leaps, changed little from song to song. Instead, the performers wallowed in the music and rhythms, passionately locked away in an atmosphere that only jazz can provide.

Through it all, these artists somehow maintained their own individuality — so many Pittsburgh pieces, but ultimately one collective voice in the billowing creativity of a Lincoln-esque world.

<https://www.post-gazette.com/ae/theater-dance/2017/05/26/Dance-review-Staycee-Pearl-dance-project-Abbey-In-the-Red-August-Wilson-Center/stories/201705260299>