

February 18, 2010

Full circle for Luckman and AAADT

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Sharon Luckman first saw **Alvin Ailey's** signature choreographic work, "Revelations," when she was 16. She was studying for the summer at the American Dance Festival in Connecticut, and after weeks of learning from the best, she got to see the best perform his greatest piece.

"I was totally blown away," Luckman said. "I remember that all of the students, including me, were running out onto the lawn afterwards, turning cartwheels. We knew we'd witnessed something that was beyond fantastic."

A short few years later, while she was studying dance at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, she was in attendance at a show of Ailey's company. She was inspired to send a letter home to her parents in Long Island, N.Y., that read simply: *Last night I saw the Alvin Riley American Dance Theatre. Now I know what I want to do with my life.*

Finding her path

Luckman was born and raised in Long Beach, N.Y., where her mother taught dance classes and her father served as a teacher, dean of students and coach at Nassau Community College. Obviously, both the academic and athletic realms were open and encouraged from an early age.

"Both of my parents are successful in things they really love," she said. "So I definitely got a sense that if you follow something you really like and are passionate about, you can be successful."

When it came time for college, she picked the nation's oldest dance program – and one of just a handful that existed at the time. She appreciated her years as a Badger, even participated in cheerleading in addition to dancing, but her time in Madison also provided her a realization.

"I didn't have the talent to ever be the top," she said. "That was part of it, but it was also partly my personality – kind of planned out and organized." So she knew administration was a better fit, but also that she could not give up her passion for dance entirely. Upon graduation, she found a gig that suited both needs close to home, at the 92nd Street YM-



Sharon Luckman is now in her 15th year as executive director of the **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre**, headquartered in New York City. (Photo by Paul Kolnik).

AAADT comes to Atlanta

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre was founded in 1958 by Alvin Ailey, who is credited with popularizing modern dance and integrating African-Americans into 20th century concert dance. His company was nicknamed the "Cultural Ambassador to the World" by the United States Congress in recognition of his contribution to the arts and his organization's dedication to cultural enrichment.

The select 30 dancers that make up the top-level performance group started the 2010 edition of their national tour, which will visit 20 cities in the U.S., this past December. Their third and next stop is Atlanta's Fox Theatre, where they will perform several different programs from Feb. 18 to Feb. 22.

To be featured in many of the shows are the ballets "Uptown" (choreographed by current AAADT dancer Matthew Rushing) and "Dancing Spirit" (Ronald K. Brown), both of which honor artistic director Judith Jamison, who is in her 20th year with the company.

Some will also include "Best of 20," which contains excerpts from favorite pieces throughout Jamison's tenure.

Every performance will conclude with "Revelations," Ailey's signature piece and widely regarded as the best-known work of modern dance. According to everyone involved, it all adds up to a tremendous engagement.

"This is a tour that is very much in celebration of Ms. Jamison's work and her vision over the past two decades," Renee Robinson, in her 28th year as an Alvin Ailey dancer, said.

"You can't miss with any of these programs," said Sharon Luckman, executive director of AAADT. "They're all exciting and they all connect to people of all backgrounds and ages."

YWHA, where she had taken classes to supplement her mother's teaching as a child. Not only was this a Y known for its support of modern dance and diversity among dancers, but it also happened to be the site of the AAADT's first-ever performance, occurring in 1958. Obviously, fate was dropping Luckman another hint.

Making the good even better

Luckman served as head of the 92nd Street Y for several years starting at age 30. She then spent a few years working with Twyla Tharp, a dancer and choreographer now famous for her work with the Broadway musical "Movin' Out."

She was in her third position, one with Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts (the only job she's held that didn't relate directly to dance), when she got a serendipitous phone call.

"Someone was asking if I'd be interested in working at **Alvin Ailey**," she said. "I told them, 'My dream? Of course'."

Originally hired as development director, Luckman came in with the goal of raising the quality of the administration to the same level that **Alvin Ailey** dancers had always been - the very top. She ascended to the role of executive director within three years, and has since seen the company move from rented studios to the five-year-old Joan Weill Center for Dance, the largest building dedicated to dance in the U.S., and expand its many community outreach programs, like the Ailey Camp for at-risk preteens. For 15 years, she has managed the marketing, fundraising and education aspects sponsored by AAADT while artistic director Judith Jamison has overseen the onstage product. The duo has combined to ensure that the company is always improving and always in touch with its audience.

"I've seen a great working relationship between those two," said Renee Robinson, an **Alvin Ailey** dancer for 28 years. "Both of them have been very focused on moving the company forward, keeping Mr. Ailey's legacy alive and making the entire organization successful."

Through it all, Luckman has spread positive thinking and formed a close bond with the dancers themselves, which Robinson can also attest to:

"She has an incredible amount of energy and wonderful sense of humor," she said. "We the dancers feel very close to her, and that's a special, special thing."

It's as if Luckman was meant for this position.

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"It really feels like this was ordained for me, considering my background, who I was and what I cared about," she said. "So much of who I am resonates with the **Alvin Ailey** mission."

And she's known it since she first saw him dance.