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Young dancers share the gospel

By Allison Tracy
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GREAT BARRINGTON —

Ailey II razzed up the Mahaiwe Saturday, as well as razzing some lucky folks who availed themselves of the master class they presented earlier at Bard College at Simon's Rock. What a great gift.

Think of Ailey II not so much as the "second company" or breeding ground for upcoming dancers of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, but, rather, as a cast of youthful dance ambassadors, sharing the gospel. It is a type of touring dance workshop, wherein exceptional, beautifully-trained, young artists eager to test their professional wings, get flying lessons.

Alvin Ailey cherry-picked his most talented scholarship students for a pioneering mission in 1974, "to establish an extended cultural community that provides dance performances, training, and community programs for all people." It was sparked during a rare cultural era in the United States, when federal monies were specifically designated to build community through the arts. Regional dance companies flowered.

Ailey II, coming as it did from an artist and choreographer virtually considered the "father" of black American dance, represented one of the rarest blossoms of that national flowering. Among other things, they purveyed his legacy repertory, and later, that of other emergent choreographers who left indelible marks. Today, its North American tour covers some 45 cities, and they are welcome everywhere.

The Mahaiwe event gathered old and new repertory. It included several Ailey favorites, like "Blues Suite," "Hidden Rites," and "The Lark Ascending," in which, drawing on what he called "blood memories," Ailey probed the raw nerve-endings of the American Black experience. He used seminal music, some of which sets the audience swaying and tapping, and some, to weeping.

The term, "blood memories" is an apt one. These are works churned by dream and intuition

from Ailey's soul. But his own muscle memory internalized the stringent technique of western modernists like Martha Graham, as much as the deep rhythms and moves of Africa. This rich abstraction accounts for their universal clout.

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As this troupe has evolved, new repertory is being added, and the Mahaiwe program opened with two freshly-minted examples, "When Dawn Comes," by Christopher Huggins, and "The External Knot," by Associate Artistic Director Troy Powell, who cut his teeth in the Ailey School and Company. Both showcase the powerful bodies, extension, expressive hands and feet that so characterize the Ailey imprint.

Everything seems so much about reaching way, way beyond — not just beyond the bondage and shackles of the past, but beyond today, beyond feasible physicality, beyond Jordan. It embodies the inherent contradiction of the human experience altogether. We are creatures of such big hopes, dreams, expectations, and gifted with so much power. Yet, we are ever encased in bodies bound by gravity. Both these works strain against this dilemma. The physically expansive, soaring and explosive, returns again and again to knotted tension. Dense percussion is restrained by legato delivery. Tender partnering smoulders, but never flames. Power is ultimately, held strenuously in check.

The music may be gospel, jazz, the driving rhythm of Philip Glass, or the brooding classicism of Robert Shuman. But music never determines the tenor of the struggle, just underwrites it.

These Ailey II dancers projected fierce enthusiasm and superb technical strength. They have not yet mastered the nuance that so richly tells the psychological stories behind and within. That issue of "reach" again — beyond technique, beyond youthful enthusiasm. The fabric of the Ailey cloak is ultimately about wisdom.