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onstage

# Some fancy footwork

Hubbard Street,  
Alvin Ailey set the  
tone for spring  
dance season



BY HEDY WEISS

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Exceptionally high-profile dance activity is on tap in the coming days in Chicago. On May 18, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater opens its annual engagement at the Auditorium Theatre, with veteran artistic director Judith Jamison, who was Ailey's immediate heir, preparing to pass her weighty job on to choreographer Robert Battle as of July 1. On May 19, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, which is in absolutely brass form these days, will return to the Harris Theater for Music and Dance with a program of three major works, including one that, ironically enough, was originally created for the Ailey dancers. Here is a closer look at what each company has in store:

Among the many Chicago premieres to be presented during Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's six programs of mixed repertory here will be "Anointed" (scheduled for opening night, and at the May 21 and May 22 matinees), an acclaimed 2010 work by former Ailey dancer Christopher L. Huggins that impressionistically chronicles the passing of the torch from Ailey to Jamison, and now from Jamison to Battle.

"I left the company in 1988, the year before Mr. Ailey died," Huggins said. "The transition to Ms. Jamison was a no-brainer; passing the company from master to muse was an obvious decision. Mr. Ailey, who led his company for 31 years, was a visionary, but as with any company going through a major shift, there was some chaos. Yet once the dust settled, it was clear Ms. Jamison's leadership would firmly cement the future of the Ailey organization."



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Lnda Celeste Sims and Jamar Roberts dance "Anointed." | © PAUL KEANE



Alonzo King

Jamison invited Huggins to create a work for her final season at a lunch meeting in Paris in 2009, when Huggins was teaching there and the Ailey company was on tour.

"She never asked for a specific piece, just a full company work," Huggins recalled. "And I knew the company history because I was a part of it since 1982, when I became a summer fellowship scholar. A year later, I was hand-picked by Mr. Ailey to join the company. So naturally I wanted to celebrate the legacy and say thank you to Ms. Jamison."

In "Passing," the opening section of "Anointed," a woman dressed in black represents Jamison, and she dances with a man (the Ailey figure) who is moving toward death and passing the reins to her.

"The woman then changes into a purple dress, getting ready for that passing from Master to Muse," Huggins explained. "I've been told purple was a favorite color of Mr. Ailey's. The four ladies who join her represent the many women who helped Ms. Jamison. During her 23-year tenure, most of the key departments were run by women, and the 'Sally Forth' section of my piece salutes their powerful character, determination and resolve. The dance's final section, '32 and Counting' [the troupe is 32 years old now], is a pure celebration of the company's amazing legacy and sure future, with Moby's song 'God Moving Over the Face of the Waters' a huge inspiration for the movement."

Other programs will include works by Battle ("Hunt," a thrilling ritual for male dancers to Les Tambours du Bronx, and "In/Side," a male solo to Nina Simone's "Wild is the Wind"); Jamison ("Forgotten Time," to *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares*); Ailey ("Three Black

Kings" and "Night Creature," to music by Duke Ellington), and more. Of course it wouldn't be an Ailey program without that ever-breath-taking signature piece, "Revelations," now 50 years old and still the closest thing to a danced baptism.



At the very moment the Ailey company is in town, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago will be presenting its company premiere of "Following the Subtle Current Upstream," a work originally created for the Ailey dancers by Alonzo King, founder of the San Francisco-based contemporary troupe LINES Ballet. "Upstream" is something of a warm-up for a multi-year, Joyce Foundation-funded collaboration between Hubbard Street and LINES, with the plan being for King to create a new work involving both companies.

Set to the music of South Africa's Miriam Makeba, India's tabla master Zakir Hussain, and composer Miguel Fraconeri, King explained his work "takes its title from the notion that there is a downward rush into our senses, and if there is any shift from that thunderous torrent we must go against the current."

## ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

- ♦ May 18-22
- ♦ Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress
- ♦ Tickets, \$30-\$87
- ♦ (800) 982-2787; [auditoriumtheatre.org](http://auditoriumtheatre.org)

## HUBBARD STREET DANCE CHICAGO

- ♦ May 19-22
- ♦ Harris Theater for Music and Dance, 205 E. Randolph
- ♦ Tickets, \$25-\$94
- ♦ (312) 334-7777; [harris-theater-chicago.org](http://harris-theater-chicago.org)

"It's like salmon swimming upstream," King said. "And I believe that to do anything different, to be truly original, you must go against the flow."

King has "retrofitted" his work for the Hubbard Street dancers, whom he describes as "having a plasticity not restricted by any particular style."

"They are easy on the floor, which is unusual for such classically trained dancers, and they can move through so many different styles because they've worked with so many different choreographers. No movement is weird to them. Of course every company has a belief system, and going to work with them is like visiting a different church."

Also on the Hubbard Street program will be two exhilarating works from recent seasons: "Untouched," the 2010 piece by Canadian-bred Azarou Barton, a Baryshnikov protégé whose mesmerizing meditation on the distinctive onstage and offstage personalities of the Hubbard Street dancers is set to music by Curtis Macdonald, Njo Kong Kie and Lev "Ljova" Zharbin, and European master Jiri Kylian's "27/32" (the title stands for the running time of 27 minutes and 32 seconds), set to music by Dirk Hübner, and to texts spoken in the native languages of the original cast members.