

Alvin Ailey celebrates 50 years of dance

by Frances Moffett
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Next week will mark the 50th anniversary of the historic Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, which was founded in 1958 by renowned dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey. Its complete repertory of over 200 works that have been performed for millions of people all over the world.

And the troupe will celebrate with Chicago-exclusive performances at The Auditorium Theatre at Roosevelt University.

Ailey began his career dancing with Lester Horton's dance company in the 1940s, and when Horton suddenly died in 1953, Ailey took over the company as director and choreographer. Soon after, he and other dancers formed AAADT and eventually became the resident dance company of the 51st Street YWCA's Clark Center for the Performing Arts in New York City. In 1960, Ailey choreographed his classic work of art *Revelations*, which brought the company international

acclaim. After his death in 1989, dancer and choreographer Judith Jamison became artistic director.

Since then, AAADT has evolved into much more than just a dance company, with additional programs including junior dance company Ailey II, The Ailey School, and various other arts in education and community programs and classes.

Lisa Johnson-Willingham has been a dancer for over 20 years. The teacher and choreographer said she aspired to become an Alvin Ailey dancer after seeing a production of *Revelations*.

"When I decided I wanted to become a professional dancer, I did my research on different companies that inspired me, especially the Alvin Ailey dance company," she told the *Defender*. "I remember seeing them when I was in middle school and high school, and I was just in awe. That's what I wanted to do. That was my focus, my journey—to be on stage performing *Revelations* with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater."

Johnson-Willingham, a Washington, D.C. native and graduate of University of the Arts in Philadelphia, eventually fulfilled that dream, dancing with AAADT, in addition to other companies like the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble, New World Dance Company, and Deeply Rooted Productions, just to name a few.

After moving to Chicago in 1999, Johnson-Willingham worked as the dance director of the Whitney Young dance department and became the director of Ailey Camp Chicago, a summer program designed to serve inner-city children and that uses dance as a means to develop self-esteem, self-discipline, creative expression and critical thinking skills. In addition to working with AileyCamp, she teaches at Columbia College Chicago, Olive Harvey and the Joffrey Ballet School.

"I wanted to be Alvin Ailey," she

said. "I wanted to do all these things. I fulfilled my desire to perform and I wanted to transition into becoming a great teacher and a great choreographer; (that's when) I moved to Chicago and began to teach and choreograph and direct the AileyCamp. I believe that I was granted and blessed with an amazing career as a dancer so that I could be a great teacher and share my experience with my students."

Johnson-Willingham said that the dance theater's 50th anniversary is a great milestone.

"Dance came from the people and it should be delivered back to the people."

—Alvin Ailey

continues and our children can learn from him. It shows that no matter where you're from, that passion, that dream, and that love for what you do can bring you success."

Vernard Gilmore, who got his start in AAADT with the junior dance company Ailey II, agrees.

"To be apart of this company of 50 years and to know that this man has given this opportunity to us, it's really special and a true blessing, especially with all the things I have been able to experience in life—a little boy from the South Side of Chicago, and now here I am touring the world. And it's because our founder had a dream to create a company like ours, and since I know its history, that makes it so much more special. There's no other one like it," he told the *Defender*.

The anniversary show, Gilmore explained, will be a collection of Ailey's works in chronological order. "It's pretty amazing because you get to see all of his colors and a lot of different sides of his personality that he brought to the stage. You get a well-rounded idea of how he approached dance and how he saw dance."

Gilmore has been dancing all his life, starting with the back-to-school parades in Englewood and his high school years at Curie high school. Like Johnson-Willingham, Gilmore said he knew he wanted to dance with AAADT after seeing a tape of Ailey's *Revelations*. He said he loved the "humanity" of it—something that is hard to find

in other ballets.

"When you're dancing anything of Mr. Ailey's, you can feel its humanity," he explained. "He's really a genius when it comes to that. His dancing is not about the steps—it's more of the feeling. You really have to bring yourself into it. You feel like you have to be responsible for his legacy."

Gilmore said that Ailey has done a lot not only for the arts movement, but for the African Americans involved in it. "He knew there was a need for a company that celebrated the Black experience and to get the world to understand that it's a universal experience," he said.

"How audacious of him (to do this) in a time where our country was not very friendly to African Americans. For him to still put that out there and to show people something different from what they thought to be was quite courageous. He's created this thing for us, and now anywhere we go around the world, you say 'Alvin Ailey' and people are in amazement. I think, as an African American, you just feel so honored to be apart of his legacy because of that. Years ago, how many people could say that they've been to all these places and performed around the world? Once I was out there, I realized how blessed I was to be there."

AAADT has performed on six continents, and in 71 countries to become the most traveled dance company. It was recently named an American Cultural Ambassador to the World by Congress. Performances run April 1-5 at the Auditorium Theatre.

