

A young Ailey dancer emerges from the ranks to take center stage.

PAGE B9



ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Clifton Brown of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, with Alice Graf, in Maurice Béjart's "Firebird."

## Dancer of the Moment: A Man for the Ailey Season

By JENNIFER DUNNING

Clifton Brown was 4 when his grandmother decided that formal physical exercise would cheer him up after his playmates, all older cousins, deserted him for school. She gave this clumsy grandchild two options: karate classes or the Take 5 Dance Academy next door in his hometown, Goodyear, Ariz.

Luckily, he chose dance. This season Mr. Brown, now 27, has emerged as one of the most gifted members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, standing out for his quietly powerful virtuoso technique and the lyrical grace and translucent inwardness of his perform-

ances. In the concluding days of the Ailey season at City Center, he will be seen in many of his current roles.

Mr. Brown is a thoughtful, analytical talker, and unsurprisingly seems most comfortable in roles that do not require larger-than-life acting. But he does cherish Robert Battle's "Unfold," a short but voluptuous love duet he is to dance on Monday with Linda Celeste Sims.

"It was almost hard to grasp," he said quietly. "New love. Beautiful, but then gone. In the moment, so you have to seize the moment before it's gone."

In Maurice Béjart's "Firebird," for which he will dance the title role on

Monday night, he began to learn how to carry a ballet as a very visible lead character. Also on Monday, Mr. Brown will be seen as the sheriff in an excerpt from Frederick Earl Mosley's new "Saddle Up!"

"The piece is so different than much of what we do in the rep," Mr. Brown said. "It feels good to do something people might not expect but enjoy anyway."

"It's fun playing that young, optimistic, do-gooder sheriff," he continued. "It's so far from that menacing drug pusher character in 'Flowers,' for example," referring to another Ailey piece he

Continued on Page 12



ANDREA MOCH/PHIL. NEW YORK TIMES  
Clifton Brown and Linda Celeste Sims in the duet "Unfold."

## Dancer of the Moment: A Man for the Ailey Season

From First Arts Page

performed in this season, "which is also fun but in a very different way."

Mr. Brown's first experience of the Ailey company was watching a video of an Ailey program he had come across in the library when he was 12. "It was like this treasure I found," he recalled. "I always knew I wanted to dance, before I knew it was a profession." He had seen dance on MTV and in commercials, but "neither felt like what I wanted to do."

Here was something different. Revealingly, it was not the Ailey company's vividly dramatic repertory that struck this young dance student, though he savored the sight of Judith Jamison, now director of the Ailey troupe, hoisting the umbrella in Ailey's

"Revelations."

What struck him most forcefully was Donna Wood's performance in Ailey's "Cry." "I related to her because at that point my arms were very long," he said. "I had just had a growth spurt."

Teachers urged him to use his arms strongly. "I heard people say how beautiful it is to have long arms. I never got it. I just thought it was difficult, and you look gangly. But when I saw the way she used her arms, I understood."

That kind of dancing, he also suddenly understood, "was what I wanted to be able to do."

Mr. Brown joined the Ailey company in 1999. Then he began a career as a stealth performer, a dancer who has the goods but moves slowly up the ranks and into the audience's consciousness, seeming suddenly to break loose to stardom in a single season. Last year Mr. Brown began to be singled out consistently for critical praise; this year he has become the dancer of the moment.

"I would say I've grown mostly because of what other people say

ONLINE: **CLIFTON BROWN**

Past articles and reviews about the dancer:

[nytimes.com/dance](http://nytimes.com/dance)

they see in my dancing," Mr. Brown said. "And if you keep doing it, enjoying it, change and growth are bound to happen. It's not particularly more confidence. There are so many different types of dancing in the company. There's always something being thrown at you, so that doesn't let you get above yourself. You're always starting with the first brick. So for me, it's great to be recognized and everything, but I always feel like there's so much further to go."

He worked hard, for example, on feeling more comfortable when he danced fast. "I had to change my mindset," he said.

Masazumi Chaya, the Ailey company's associate artistic director, has also talked to Mr. Brown about letting more of himself come through spontaneously in his dancing. "Alvin said, 'Use my steps to show yourself,'" Mr.

Chaya recalled. "I love that line." Sometimes, Mr. Chaya said, he encourages Mr. Brown, a rabid film fan, to draw on a character "from yesterday's movie." But Mr. Chaya said he also sometimes saw in him the quality of simplicity and the virtuoso baller technique of Erik Bruhn, the great danseur noble.

To what does Mr. Chaya, a former dancer and a hands-on director, attribute the sudden blooming of dancers like Ms. Sims last season and Mr. Brown this one? "The Ailey dancers love dancing," he said. "No doubt about that."

Still, he added, Mr. Brown and Ms. Sims are two of several company members who never miss a class, no matter how tired they are. And they arrive early at the theater to rehearse by themselves before working with Mr. Chaya or the full company.

"They think seriously about this as a career, not just a job," Mr. Chaya said. "I think it's taking responsibility for the individual life — not just, 'I'm going to be doing some good dancing to-night.'"