

DAILY PILOT

Ailey dancers coming to O.C.

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre Co. will perform at SFCTA March 6 to 11.

March 1, 2012

By Candice Baker

A cultural treasure returns to Orange County next week, marking a new period in its renowned history.

"The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was founded in 1958; it was a company for all types of dancers — black, white, Hispanic, Asian. There was no place in New York like it. It was a place where anybody who wanted to dance could be part of a great company," Ailey dancer Antonio Douthit said.

Over the years, the company has earned a prestigious reputation for technical and artistic excellence, as well as an uncontested title as an ambassador for American arts and culture; it has even been designated as such by the U.S. Congress.

Artistic Director Robert Battle took the helm in July 2011, a handpicked successor to longtime director Judith Jamison. He has been involved with Ailey since 1999.

"The transition has been very smooth," Douthit said. "We knew he was an amazing choreographer, but we've just realized that he's very humble; he's very giving. I feel he's taken the company to some places we wouldn't have gone with our previous director, but without her we would never have been able to get to this point."

Douthit praised Battle's selections for this season, including works by new choreographers to the company and the world premiere of "Home," an 18-minute piece by Robert Harris that's inspired by the lives of about a dozen people who are living with or affected by HIV.

He also praised Paul Taylor's "Arden Court," which marks the first time the company has worked with the renowned modern dance choreographer; it is a contemporary piece set to a baroque score.

"Everything that we have on the road with us, you guys are going to see in Orange County," Douthit said. He described "Takademe," one of Battle's first pieces, as a "quirky, whimsical number that's really quite brilliant."

The company was founded by Ailey using the angular Horton technique of ballet.

"He hired ballet dancers, jazz dancers, all kinds of dancers because he wanted us to be able to do everything," Douthit said. "That makes us unique, in that we might do a Horton ballet for 20 minutes, then more of a hip-hop style of ballet, then more lyrical work. We can move between different styles of dance gracefully."

Douthit said the company's fame has allowed it to expand its own reach.

"I think we've taken more of a front row seat inviting people into our world, instead of having to just entertain," he said. "Yes it is a dance, so we're here to entertain you, but we're also here to educate you."

Douthit's beginnings at Ailey are something of a marvel; the St. Louis native didn't start dancing until he was 16.



Antonio Douthit, left, and Alicia Graf Mack in Paul Taylor's "Arden Court." (Paul Kolnik)

"I never told anyone this," he prefaced with a laugh, "but I was a cheerleader prior to dancing, so that's where I got the possibility from. People never thought I could make a career out of it, but I had so many people telling me that I could do this. I'm just happy that I paid attention to them and I followed it."

He moved to Harlem when he was 19, and happened to audition for Ailey in 2003 when they needed one male dancer. "I got the job right then," he said. "I've been happy ever since. After Ailey, I think I'll get back to my community and teach more there in St. Louis. But for at least the next five or six years, I'll still be at Ailey."

Douthit said he believed the desire to teach comes from his experiences at Ailey.

"It's a great thing, because Mr. Ailey always believed in giving back to the community; we do lots of outreach and student performances," he said. It's helped me to realize that not only are our gifts to dance and entertain, but also to give back; to teach dance and help make this art form continue to the next generation."

If You Go

What: Alvin Ailey Dance Theater

When: March 6 to 11

Where: Segerstrom Center for the Arts, 600 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa

Cost: \$16 and up

Information: (714) 556-2787 or scfta.org