

2008 Dance  
Magazine  
Awards

Each year *Dance Magazine* gives awards to leading members of the dance field. Each awardee chooses the person from whom they would like to receive the award. This year, on December 8 at New York's Florence Gould Hall, Harvey Lichtenstein will present the award to **Pina Bausch**; Damian Woetzel will introduce **Ethan Stiefel**; Judith Jamison will honor **Sylvia Waters**; and Deborah Jowitt will speak about **Lawrence Rhodes**. In addition, each awardee will be feted with a brief performance or film. For ticket information, turn to page 43. And if you want to see video clips from last year's event, see [www.dancemagazine.com](http://www.dancemagazine.com).

Once, while on tour, Alvin Ailey noticed a young company member gazing wistfully out of the bus window. "She must be thinking about her son," he said to himself. And Sylvia Waters was. It was 1974, and preparations were underway for *Ailey Celebrates Ellington*. While the company and its artistic director were on the road, someone was needed to rehearse the young dancers back in New York. Ailey tapped Waters for the job. Necessity and motherhood began the fruitful partnership, as that young group became Ailey II with Waters as their director. So the story goes.

Sylvia  
Waters

Sylvia Waters grew up in Harlem. At 13, she followed her best friend to the New Dance Group on a whim to take class with Carmen deLavallade and Alvin Ailey. She later attended Juilliard, studying with Martha Graham and Antony Tudor. After a stint in Europe, where she danced with Donald McKayle and Maurice Béjart, she returned to NYC in 1968 and joined Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

"When I first saw her onstage I thought she was oddly gorgeous and had so much integrity," says Judith Jamison, artistic director of AAADT. Integrity is just one of the qualities that describe her; honesty (in word and action) and passion (for life, knowledge, and dance) are others. It's no wonder Ailey entrusted the chrysalis of young dancers to her. For years this woman, whose youthfulness matches her wisdom, kept his intimate council; she now acts as the bridge between school and company.

Since 1974 Waters has been preserving Ailey's legacy by instilling his spirit in the youth of Ailey II. Currently the company often stages 12 works up to 42 weeks a year and has performed throughout the United States and internationally in Havana, Berlin, and the Caribbean Islands.

"Sylvia had the ability to *listen* to Alvin and just take it all in," says Jamison. "When you see a dancer who was coached by her, you can see Sylvia coming through. She has retained the essence of it. Embedded in her is the *sense* of Alvin."

Rachael McLaren is one of the most recent progeny to be accepted into the first company. While in Ailey II she did many of Waters' roles. "When she shows you, there is a clear intention in the movement. But she wants you to find it on your own. She taught me that I'm never done, that there is always something to explore." Overwhelmed upon

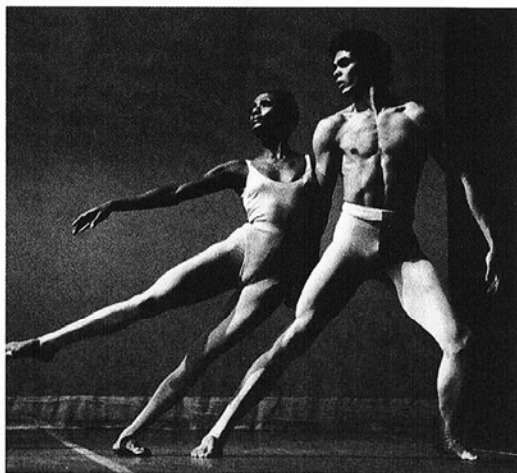
receiving her contract with AAADT, McLaren realized, "I have been prepared." And not merely as a dancer but as a person. "Sylvia makes life lessons out of rehearsals," says McLaren. "It's not just about being a dancer, but who you *are*, who you want to be."

Waters chooses repertory with an eye to the growth of each group. Ulysses Dove and Donald Byrd have set work on the company as have up-and-comers Shen Wei, Christopher Huggins, and Camille A. Brown. The cultivation of choreographers was a central part of Ailey's vision. This spring Waters gave apprentice Chang Yong Sung the opportunity to choreograph a duet for their 2008 Joyce season. Sung, now a full member of Ailey II, says, "Her mind is a museum, a repository for information, a steel trap lined in velvet."

Currently 85 percent of the present Ailey company has come through Ailey II. Others have gone on to work with the likes of Ronald K. Brown/Evidence, Alonzo King's LINES Ballet, David Parsons, Elisa Monte, and Complexions Contemporary Ballet. Some have segued into Broadway shows like *The Lion King* and *The Little Mermaid*.

And just what does this elegant, energetic woman say of propagating some of the world's finest dancers? Her dimples emerge, and as she modestly grins, you can almost see the 13-year old girl Alvin Ailey taught years ago. "Well you know," she replies, "dance has kept me in good company." Indeed it has.

—Theresa Ruth  
Howard



Left: Sylvia Waters and Hector Mercado in Alvin Ailey's *Streams*, early 1970s.