

January 2011

DT notes | FACE TO FACE

Matthew Rushing

Grooming the next generation of Ailey dancers

BY THERESA RUTH HOWARD

This has been a year of big transitions for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater: the naming of Judith Jamison's successor, Robert Battle, the death of Ailey School director Denise Jefferson and longtime company dancer Matthew Rushing being appointed rehearsal director this past June.

Though a veteran onstage, Rushing admits to being a "toddler" when it comes to teaching in the classroom. His new responsibility involves preserving, restoring and instructing the company's work and new choreography, teaching classes while on tour and conducting workshops at the school. He is enthusiastically sinking his teeth into grooming the next generation of Ailey dancers, alongside Associate Artistic Director Masazumi Chaya. And to better focus on this role, this month marks the 2010 *Dance Magazine* Award-winner's final New York City Center season. "I know that this company is truly part of my identity," he says. "What Mr. Ailey set up and what Ms. Jamison continues, it's me."

Dance Teacher: Are you adjusting to your new appointment?

Matthew Rushing: The hardest thing is trying to find my lane, trying to sift my ideas through Judy and Chaya's visions. Of course coming in, I have all of these ideas about what I want to change. But I now understand why a lot of things happen that I didn't agree with as a dancer. I found out why they work that way. It's humbling in a sense. I still have that

dancer's mentality, so working in a rehearsal or scheduling classes, I know what they need and like.

DT: Do you enjoy leading class?

MR: No. It works my nerves, because as a dancer I know how important class is, whether before performance or rehearsal. I look to class to set me up, to work out the aches and pains; the teacher has to come through with all of those things. When I stand in front of the room, I feel that pressure. And when a class is not working, it's the worst feeling, but you have to keep going. I'm so used to structuring class for professionals, that with students, I feel that I'm not entertaining enough, since the exercises are so geared toward the technical capabilities. I'm learning how to be more personable, how to lighten the atmosphere and what this big word "technique" means. It's another training ground.

DT: Is teaching choreography a different experience for you?

MR: I love teaching choreography. It's much deeper because I'm not just passing on steps, but imagery. I'm creating the

platform from which this dancer is going to make their artistic choices, in the way that I give them the information. It is a great responsibility, but I am much more comfortable in these shoes.

DT: What is the greatest lesson you've learned throughout your 18 years with the company?

MR: When you get a lot of work in the Ailey company, you think you "know" something. My head was in the wrong place with authority. Then I got the chance to take dancers to Mexico 10 years ago with Ailey dancer Hope Boykin. It was a three-city tour of our own choreography. I had never felt so isolated, frustrated and disturbed in my life. I got a taste of what Judy goes through as director. I let her know that she would never have an attitude problem from me again. The more I respected and trusted authority, the better our relationship and the more I got out of my experience. **DT**

Theresa Ruth Howard, a former dancer with Dance Theatre of Harlem and Armitage Gone! Dance, teaches at The Ailey School and internationally.

