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APRIL 2002

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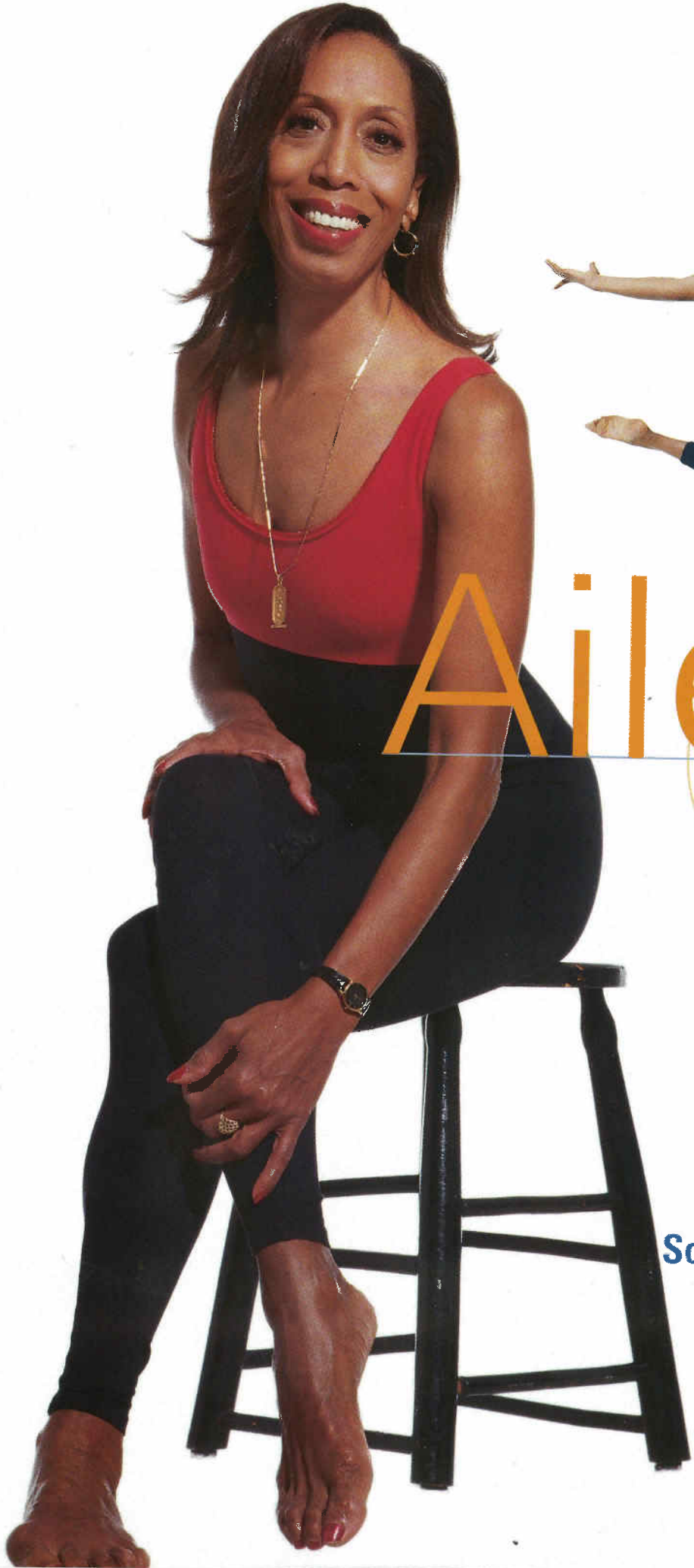
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DENISE JEFFERSON

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wisdom and grace.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDUARDO PATINO

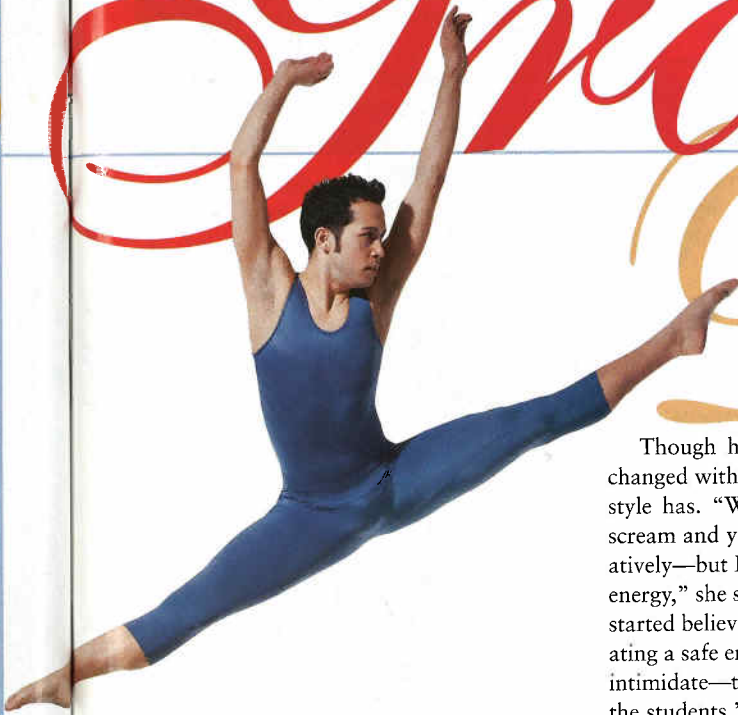
“Ready, dancers,” says Denise Jefferson in a soothing voice, prompting the 9 am modern class at The Ailey School to begin a series of floor exercises. As the 17 students contract and elongate their muscular bodies to the steady beat of a drum, Jefferson circles the room gracefully: chin lifted, hands on her hips and eyes focused intently on the dancers. Dressed in a pale bluish-green leotard and a navy blue knit jumpsuit folded at the waist, Jefferson’s lean yet sculpted figure resembles those of students less than half her age.



DENISE JEFFERSON WITH AILEY/FORDHAM BFA STUDENTS

Grand Dame

by Susan Amoruso



Though her physique seemingly hasn’t changed with the years, Jefferson’s teaching style has. “When I was younger, I would scream and yell more—not necessarily negatively—but I was more personal and high-energy,” she says. “As I’ve gotten older, I’ve started believing in creating an artist by creating a safe environment. You don’t have to intimidate—that’s old school. You support the students.”

It is as the director of The Ailey School that “Ms. J” guides the approximately 4,000 students who attend classes annually. The legendary Alvin Ailey himself selected Jefferson for the esteemed position in 1984.

In collaboration with Judith Jamison, the artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and The Ailey School, Jefferson perpetuates Ailey’s mission to make dance accessible to all.

Yet, with wisdom and sophistication Jefferson has exceeded this original goal. Though Jefferson is most recently regarded for breaking new ground with the development of the Ailey/Fordham BFA program, for the past 18 years she has helped establish the foundation for the school’s preeminence.

A diverse course curriculum, including Horton- and Graham-based techniques,

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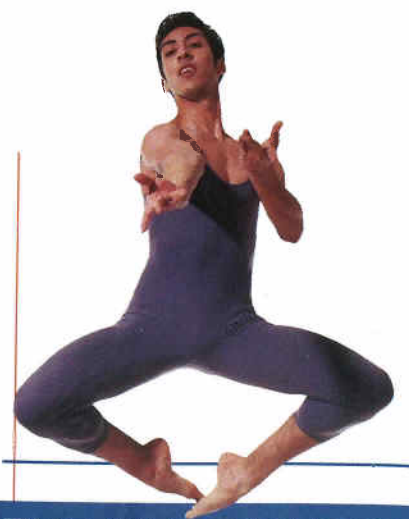


ballet, jazz and Western African dance, allows students to become well-rounded dancers capable of performing AAADT repertory, in ballet or modern dance companies or on Broadway. In keeping with Ailey's belief that dance instruction should be for everyone, students can also choose from a range of training levels, including First Steps (ages 3-6); the Junior Division (ages 3-17); the Fellowship Program (ages 15-21); the Ailey/Fordham BFA in Dance; and open-to-the-public classes.

Respect for the educational process, however, is non-negotiable. Pre-professional students must abide by dress codes and rules, respect the faculty and attend classes regularly. "I believe very much in rules and traditions," says Jefferson. If a student is acting out, Jefferson persists in discovering the root of the problem. On staff is a mix of female and male faculty advisors as well as a psychologist and a nutritionist. "I don't want to just tell kids to lose weight," says Jefferson. "It's about giving them tools so they can make informed, good judgments, not beating your own ideas into their heads."

Whether students feed into the renowned AAADT or its second company, Alvin Ailey II, join professional dance troupes in the United States and abroad or just become fervent supporters of the arts, they leave the school with invaluable tools for the future. "Through the arts your own voice is validated, your uniqueness is appreciated, your communication skills are developed, you learn discipline, time management and a respect for authority—all wonderful things that can go beyond dancing," says Jefferson.

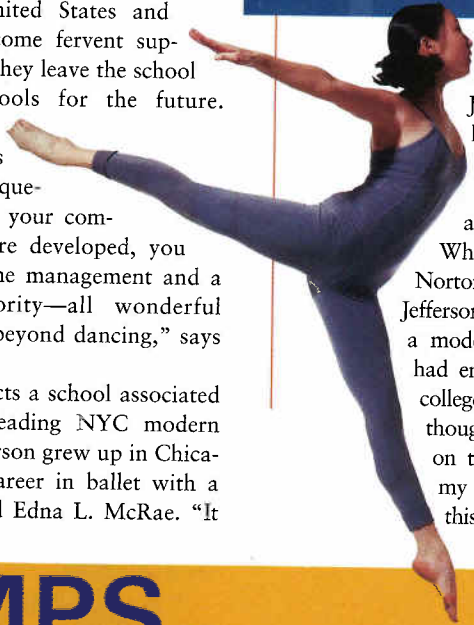
Though she directs a school associated with one of the leading NYC modern dance troupes, Jefferson grew up in Chicago training for a career in ballet with a strict teacher named Edna L. McRae. "It



THE AILEY SCHOOL

211 West 61st Street
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New York, NY 10023
212-767-0590
www.alvinailey.org

DATE FOUNDED: 1969
PROGRAM DESCRIPTIONS: First Steps (ages 3-6); Junior Division (ages 3-17); Fellowship Program (ages 15-21); Certificate and Independent Study Programs (ages 17 and up); Summer Intensive Program (professional division: ages 16-25; junior division: ages 12-15)



didn't really touch my heart," says Jefferson of ballet. "I liked moving, but I didn't really enjoy pointe work." It was as an undergraduate at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, that Jefferson was first exposed to a modern class, which she had enrolled in to fulfill a college gym requirement: "I thought, 'Why am I sitting on the floor? Where are my pink tights? What is this improv?'"

AILEY CAMPS

Started in Kansas City, Missouri, in the late 1980s, AileyCamps are full-day, six-week summer scholarship camps designed to give at-risk youth tools with which to change their lives. Students age 11 to 14 participate in dance classes as well as personal development workshops, creative writing classes and field trips. "The idea is not that we will necessarily train tomorrow's professional dancers, but that we will help young people become stronger and better," says Jefferson. Yet, it's not unheard of for talent to be discovered at these camps: Ailey II member Terrence A. Poplar was one of its original participants.

Currently, there are AileyCamps in Kansas City, MO; Chicago, IL; Bridgeport, CT; Boston, MA; Kansas City, KS; Berkeley, CA; and New York, NY, where the camp is co-sponsored by The Children's Aid Society.

