



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater still flies high after 50 years

Barbara Hoover / Special to The Detroit News

Thursday, February 12, 2009

A visit by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, arguably the world's most popular dance troupe, is always a cause for joy. But this year, as Ailey arrives for performances at the Detroit Opera House, the joy is even headier than usual. The current 27-city tour continues the celebration of Ailey's 50th anniversary season. To survive for 50 years is remarkable for any arts organization; but to thrive, as Ailey has, is even rarer. Yes, the company has some of the world's best dancers, a varied repertory with wide audience appeal, its own handsome building in New York City and solid finances. But its worldwide popularity is due to more than that, says Judith Jamison, who became artistic director after Ailey's death in 1989.

"The longevity is due to the humanity of the man," says Jamison. "Alvin cared about us as people, then as dancers. He cared about the humanness of all of this. His genius, his vision was about the individual and how the individual, with the help of people behind you steering you in the right direction, is connected to the community."

That's exactly the theme of one of the special events of the Ailey company's Detroit visit.

"Go in Grace," a new dance choreographed by Ailey dancer Hope Boykin, includes an onstage performance on Saturday evening by the all-female a cappella vocal group Sweet Honey in the Rock and its American Sign Language signer.

"I've always wanted to work with Sweet Honey," says Jamison, who invited them to collaborate on the new dance. "Their music is very much from the old church, from African-American hymns. Their harmonies are unbelievable."

All the singers contributed music to the score for "Go in Grace," while Boykin wrote the story about a young girl growing up and being shaped and supported by family and friends.

"It's about the idea that it takes a village," says Boykin. She calls the opportunity to make her solo debut as an Ailey choreographer (she previously choreographed a number with two other Ailey dancers) "a gift from Miss Jamison."

It was also an unusual challenge, because Boykin had to create movement for the singers as well as the dancers and integrate the two.

"Many of the Sweet Honey singers have had Broadway and stage experience, so the stage is not an unfamiliar place for them," says Boykin. "They collaborated with the dancers, and the dancers just loved them."

Boykin succeeded, as noted by a New York Times critic: "The production's fluidity is a real pleasure."

Other treats prepared for the anniversary tour: A world premiere titled "Festa Barocca," by Italian choreographer Mauro Bigonzetti, which offers the rare chance to see the entire 30-dancer troupe on stage at one time, scheduled today and Sunday; new productions of Ailey's "Blues Suite," first performed at the Ailey troupe's New York debut in 1958, and George Faison's 1971 "Suite Otis," both scheduled for the Saturday matinee; and "Anniversary Highlights," a compilation of Ailey excerpts scheduled Friday evening. The company's signature, Ailey's masterpiece "Revelations," is on all the programs.

Incidentally, for souvenir hunters, besides the usual T-shirts and posters, there's an anniversary Barbie doll dressed in a long white dress designed after the costume worn in the "Wade in the Water" section of "Revelations." It can be ordered for \$50 from the Ailey web site, www.alvinailey.org.

Jamison, who has helmed the company so successfully for two decades, has announced she's retiring in 2011. She'll stay on in a smaller role, but she hasn't begun trimming her duties or settled on a successor.

"I still have two years!" she exclaims. But she has definite ideas of what the job requires.

"Excellence, integrity, balance," she says -- just the same old Ailey standards.

Barbara Hoover is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.

© Copyright 2008 The Detroit News. All rights reserved.