

# ENCORE ATLANTA

THE FABULOUS FOX THEATRE

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Alvin Ailey American  
Dance Theater  
company member  
Linda Celeste Sims.



## IN CELEBRATION OF *Revelations*

An American dance classic turns 50

By BRET LOVE

ANDREW ECCLES

Few dance companies carry the worldwide name recognition of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. And even fewer dance works boast the influential artistic legacy of Ailey's *Revelations*, which the New York Times hailed as "modern dance's unquestionable greatest hit."

2011 brings two significant milestones in the Ailey company's history, marking both the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Revelations* and the end of legendary choreographer Judith Jamison's tenure as artistic director. We recently spoke with Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, a former lead dancer who now serves as director of Ailey Arts In Education and national director of Ailey Camp (which opens its fifth year in Atlanta this summer), to get some perspective on the company's past, present and future.

### How did you first get involved with the company?

I studied at the Ailey School when I was in the performing arts school here in New York City (a.k.a. the Fame School), and I was on scholarship for a couple of years. I came back and auditioned for the company in January of 1986 and was taken in by Mr. Ailey. The rest is history!

### What do you think sets Ailey apart from other dance companies?

I think the most important thing is that we make a connection – through our performances, our teaching and our accessibility. Alvin had a love for people, and I think people feel that warmth and openness. Our signature work, *Revelations*, is definitely something that everyone connects with. It's a story of celebration, of overcoming hardships and triumphing, and feeling good through the music and the beautiful dancing and choreography. That show is something that we are fortunate to have, and it has been special for us.

### This is Judith Jamison's last year as artistic director. What was she like for you to work with as a dancer?

I've always found her to be very generous as an artist. As you can imagine, a lot of



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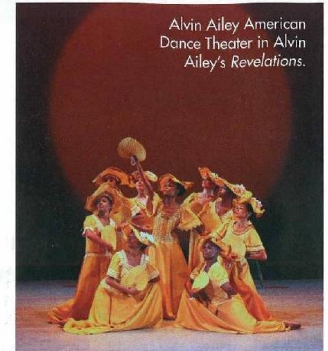
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the women who came after her were in awe of her talent and her performances. To have to step into those roles was very, very challenging. But, she was always supportive, encouraging and made us feel comfortable. I had a wonderful time working with her on the role in *Divining*, as well as *Cry*, which was a whole other level of challenges. Like Alvin, she has always allowed her artists to express their individuality, and that's very important. I think that's something that makes the Ailey company such a sought-out place for young artists.

### How do you think she impacted the company's artistic direction during her tenure?

It was her goal to make sure that the company was a strong, viable organization. Everyone knows that some of our earlier years were difficult financially. She was instrumental in working with our executive director to ensure that we had a strong board that could continue Alvin's vision and help support her visions. Creatively, financially and artistically, she is a dynamic woman. I have the greatest respect for her and I consider her a friend. She's been very supportive of me and the work that I do – overseeing the Arts In Education Program and our summer camps.

### Where do you see the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre heading in the next 50 years?



Alvin Ailey American  
Dance Theater in Alvin  
Ailey's *Revelations*.

We've been very fortunate: Alvin left his print on the dance world, and Judy has left her print on the dance world and the Ailey organization as well. I think that her successor, Robert Battle, is a dynamic man with an incredible choreographic voice. I think audiences will continue to connect with Ailey through his works and leadership. But Judy will remain part of the organization, because this is a home for those of us that have that connection. I look forward to the future and working with Robert, continuing to reach out and bring in new people and encouraging them to support the arts. ■

*Bret Love is the founder of ecotourism/conservation site GreenGlobalTravel.com; the national managing editor of INSite magazine; and music editor for Georgia Music Magazine. He freelances for more than a dozen other national and international publications, and performs on numerous improv teams with Jackie at Relapse Theatre.*

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