

Ailey Program Pairs Fordham Dancers with Emerging Choreographers

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By Janet Sassi

A new program at the Alvin Ailey Dance Studio has Ailey-Fordham students moving in new directions—literally and figuratively.

Ailey Artistic Director Robert Battle has initiated New Directions Choreography Lab (NDCL) to help emerging choreographers develop new work. The program enlists highly trained Ailey students to work with them on the process as a purely creative experience, free from any type of restrictive expectation.

Recently, three Fordham students were given the opportunity to help up-and-coming choreographer Camille Brown actualize a dance-in-progress that she said was partly inspired by depictions of African Americans in a Subway sandwich commercial.

Fordham College at Lincoln Center sophomores Patrick Coker, Rachel Secret and Jacquelin Harris were part of an ensemble that performed the three-part piece last semester at the Joan Weill Center for Dance on West 55th Street.

The student dancers collaborated with Brown on interpreting her vision of the history of African-American humor, its bald stereotyping and its use of caricature in minstrel shows and other venues.

Students were taught the choreography, which merged stereotypical movement, clichéd vocal riffs and vigorous modern dance steps, over a period of five weeks. During that time, they were encouraged to bring their own artistic expression to their dance, they said.



Ailey-Fordham students Jacquelin Harris (left), Patrick Coker (second from right) and Rachel Secret (right) performing in a piece choreographed by Camille Brown. Photo by Michael Dames



Choreographer Camille Brown thanks Ailey students for staging her work. Photo by Michael Dames

Secret, a double major in dance and political science, said that the piece changed considerably from where it started. She valued the opportunity that NDCL had given her to go deeper into dance performance: Working with a choreographer on an emerging piece, she said, took her well “beyond technique.”

“It was really interesting to interpret, and hard,” Secret said. “It was different from the normal Ailey training because this was a chance for us to build on our own artistry, which is important if you are working toward being a professional dancer.”

Sophomore Jacquelin Harris said that the topic made her think about how movement related to the creation of character.

“There is a symbolism behind each step,” she said. “[It] caused me to be more than just a dancer, but also an actor.”

Brown expressed her appreciation of NDCL’s collaborative aspect.

“This gave me the opportunity to work intensively to figure out what I am doing with the new piece,” she said. “It was amazing to have a creative playground.”

NDCL plans to support two new emerging choreographers every semester, offering Ailey-Fordham students a chance to stage cutting-edge choreography while earning their degrees. Students must try out at the beginning of each term for the choreographic labs. Those chosen are given credit for their participation.