

Ailey II stays true to its founder's vision

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Ailey II, composed of some of the country's best young dancers, will perform this week at the Folly Theater.

Alvin Ailey, the founder of the Alvin Ailey Dance Company, always wanted a separate company to allow students of the Ailey School to get a taste of the professional dance world before they embarked on their own dance careers.

Ailey II, the company he created for this purpose in 1974, will hold a residency this week for the Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey and will also offer four public performances at 7 p.m. Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday, and 2 and 7 p.m. Saturday at the Folly Theater, 300 W. 12th St.

In 1975, Ailey appointed one of his best dancers, Sylvia Waters, to direct Ailey II.

"He wanted to help emerging talent, the best and the brightest in the Ailey School, prepare them for careers in professional dance," Waters said by phone last week. "He wanted them to hone their skills by working with professional choreographers. Ailey II also gave him a group of bodies to work out new movements for his own dance company."

Tyrone Aiken, executive director of the Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey, sees Ailey II as an integral part of Ailey's vision.

"Alvin Ailey wanted to give young people an opportunity to learn the rigors of being on their own, being responsible," Aiken said. "It's a training opportunity. They have a chance to learn many of Ailey's works while they're performing and touring. The goal is to prepare them to go anywhere in the concert world."

Although the dancers in Ailey II are fresh out of school, they're definitely professional.

"These are very strong dancers," Waters said. "They don't audition; they are selected. They do extensive touring, and even though they are at the beginning of their careers, they get paid — not much, but they do get paid."

When the company is in Kansas City, Ailey II will perform "Ailey's Highlights," a medley of excerpts of Ailey works, as well as several new works.

"We'll also be doing a lot of outreach activities, with performances at schools and a lot of interaction with students and young dancers," Waters said. "We've been coming to Kansas City every other year since probably 1983 or '84. We always enjoy returning to what we consider our second home. The audiences are always hospitable, and we always have a wonderful time."

The Saturday night concert is a fundraiser for the Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey. Aiken anticipates a fabulous time for all.

"We're really excited to do something creative with our after-party," Aiken said. "Following the performance, folks can get on a trolley from the Folly to the Crossroads, where they'll get treats from Michael Smith's restaurant. Then we'll walk into a tent with a dance floor and a DJ. We think that after seeing Ailey II, our patrons will be in the mood to do some dancing of their own."

For tickets, call 816-931-8993 or go to www.kcfaa.org.