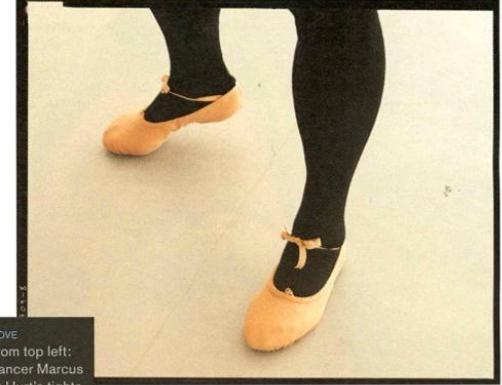


A LEG UP
Writer Harry Hurt III stretches before his dance routine.



INTO THE GROOVE
Clockwise from top left: Alvin Ailey dancer Marcus Jarrell Willie; Hurt's tights and ballet slippers; Hurt and Aisha Mitchell dance the jitterbug; Guillermo "Mo" Asca strikes a pose.



Tough Guys Do Dance

In honor of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's winter season, from Nov. 28 through Dec. 30, writer **Harry Hurt III** traded slacks and loafers for tights and ballet slippers in order to experience Ailey's magical vision for himself.

| *Photography by Dustin Aksland* |

I stared in the mirror at a paunchy 60-year-old white guy in black ballet tights and a pink golf shirt. He was crouched on one knee in a practice studio at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater on West 55th Street, surrounded by five much younger Latino and African-American professional dancers. As the opening notes of Duke Ellington's classic jazz composition *Night Creature* filled the air, I let the music seize my body and soul, trying to forget that the white guy in the mirror was me.

"Da da da da boom-boom... da da da da boom-boom."

For the preceding 90 minutes, I'd experienced the joys—and physical pains—of training to perform a 60-second dance routine under the tutelage of Ailey company veterans Mo Asca and Hope Boykin. They graciously assured me that my age, ethnicity and decaying athletic condition did not preclude me from helping them realize the late founder's eclectic vision.

"Alvin Ailey wanted human beings on stage, not cookie-cutter dancers," Mo informed me. "Everybody here is unique. We've got dancers who are big, small, short and tall. We try to break stereotypes by being a mirror of society. Mr. Ailey always said, 'Dance came from the people, and it should be delivered back to the people.'"

Ailey himself came from humble origins and personified diversity. A gay African-American born in Rogers, Texas, and raised by a single mom, he didn't even take up dance until the relatively ripe old age of 18. After studying under dance master Lester Horton in California, he moved to New York to start his own company. Ailey's uniquely **CONTINUED...**

...CONTINUED American blend of ballet and modern dance made his performances accessible to mass audiences worldwide and earned him acclaim as one of the nation's preeminent cultural ambassadors.

Under the leadership of Ailey's recently retired muse, Judith Jamison, and newly appointed director, Robert Battle, the company has continued to innovate, infusing performances with elements ranging from tap and jitterbug to hip-hop and capoeira. In addition to developing professional dancers, they offer courses to the general public, with rates starting at \$16.50 for a single class. As Jamison once put it, "If you can get yourself through the door, you can take a class."

Having gotten through the door, I was now more concerned about breaking a leg or ripping a tendon and being carried out on a stretcher. The warm-up exercises Mo and Hope led me through featured so many pliés, tendus, leg swings, coccyx balances, grapevines, twists, lunges and leaps, I broke out in a cold sweat punctuated by hot flashes.

Mo then announced that the climax of the *Night Creature* routine called for me to lift my partner off her feet and swing her around on my hip. I sensed that my assigned partner for the piece, 27-year-old Aisha Mitchell, understandably feared for her own health and well-being. As it happened, I stumbled on my first practice attempt, and tumbled down on top of her. All that saved us from serious injury was the padded Marley

floor and my weak-armed inability to lift her more than a few inches off it in the first place. Next thing I knew it was showtime.

"Da da da da boom-boom... da da da da boom-boom."

When the music started, I rose from my initial one-kneed crouch and stood next to Aisha, swaying my butt in figure-eight-shaped "mess arounds" with one hand on my belly and one hand resting on her shoulder.

I followed with a trio of whirligig spins, thrusting my arms forward at Aisha while working my chest in concave "contractions" and bow-chested "pushes." After a quick butt-bump with our arms crossed high over our heads, we launched into a modified jitterbug, alternately smiling at each other and at the imaginary audience beyond the mirror.

As we rocked out of the jitterbug, Aisha kept smiling bravely and I gritted my teeth. A split second later, she leaped off the floor and onto my right hip. Summoning all my late-middle-aged strength, I somehow managed to keep her there for a full turn without dropping her again. She bounded back down to the floor and into a one-kneed crouch. I crossed my arms high overhead and the music stopped.

The paunchy white guy in the black ballet tights and by now soaking-wet pink golf shirt smiled at the guy in the mirror in stunned disbelief, realizing that he was me. Thanks to Mo, Hope and Aisha, we had—however briefly and ungracefully—danced like night creatures of Alvin Ailey. **Q**