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NEW YORK BEACON, April 9, 2009 - April 15, 2009
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Dr. George W. Faison is 'Movin' On' in new work for Alvin Ailey II

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Lifestyles/Society Editor**

For more than 40 years Dr. George W. Faison has reigned as one of the dance and theatre world's most respected director/choreographer/author/mentor/educator and designers.

Theater during Ailey II's anticipated two week season premiering on Wednesday, April 15 at The Ailey Citigroup Theater (405 West 55th Street). The season will run through Sunday, April 26.

"Movin' On" is a work about letting go of the old and embrac-

cluded Debbie Allen and Gary DeLoatch and his ballets "Suite Otis," "Slaves" and "Tilt" have become dance classics. They are audience favorites and are still performed today.

In 1974 Faison was hired for his highest profile assignment — to choreograph "The Wiz" — a big-budget Broadway musical based on The Wizard of Oz, but updated to take place in an urban ghetto. Upon its opening on Broadway, "The Wiz" received mixed reviews.

Though the show did not fare well with most critics, a massive advertising campaign brought in a huge audience and the show won seven Tony® Awards including Best Musical, Best Score, Best Supporting Actor and Actress.

Faison took home a Tony® for Best Choreography making him the first African American to win that honor. He also won Drama Desk and Carbonell awards for "The Wiz." He was nominated for another Tony® for "Porgy and Bess" at Radio City Music Hall and received an Emmy Nomination for "The Josephine Baker Story," starring Lynn Whitfield.

In 1996 Faison created a dance for Ballet Hispanico of New York based on the life and murder of Tejano music star, Selena. In addition he founded the American Performing Arts Collaborative (A-PAC), a production organization which will develop and present theatrical, educational, and entertainment events. He adapted, directed, and choreographed "King" for President Clinton's 1997 inauguration and developed a new musical, "Heaven And The Homeboy."

Faison has staged and directed concerts and videos for such greats as Ashford & Simpson; Natalie Cole; Earth, Wind & Fire; Roberta Flack; Aretha Franklin; Stephanie Mills; Dionne Warwick; Stevie Wonder; Betty Carter; and Miles Davis, to name a few.

Known for his keen eye for brilliant new talent, the famed choreographer gave first professional jobs to many well known performers S. Epatha Merson, Jackee, Debbie Allen, Phylicia Rashad and Hinton Battle.

In 1975 financial reasons forced Faison to end the Universal Dance Experience and for the rest of that decade and into the eighties Faison, while continuing to choreograph dances, began to move into directing for the musical theater. On occasion, his path would lead him to a revival of his most successful effort, "The Wiz," the last of which was in 1995.

In 1989 he wrote, staged and co-produced the NBC TV tribute "Cosby Salutes Ailey." He staged and co-wrote the recent PBS TV special "Cook, Dixon & Young." Other film and TV projects included the "Cotton Club" movie, the ABC TV series



"I've wanted to do something positive, but people have felt I was a Black activist when I recognized my roots. I was interested in pop music. That turned some people off, but I found beauty in the ordinary and everyday." — Dr. George W. Faison

The prominent professor of dance has left his indelible footprint all over the Broadway community and shows no signs of slowing down either.

His brilliant repertoire of work was recognized by UMASS Amherst, his Alma Mater, who presented him with his first honorary D.F.A., and where he toils as an adjunct professor. He has also taught at Philadelphia's University of the Arts and the University of Michigan at Kalamazoo.

Faison's most recent remarkable work of art is a new ballet he created exclusively for Ailey II, "Movin' On," to Betty Carter's track of the same title. The consummate choreographer had a special place in his heart for Carter and her untimely death in 1998 from pancreatic cancer brought to a close a remarkable career spanning nearly fifty years and an end to their friendship.

In a tribute to Carter, long regarded by jazz insiders as perhaps the consummate jazz vocalist of the late 20th century who received a Presidential honor for her work in 1997, Faison has saturated her "Movin' On" track around his newest master dance work of the same name.

The highly acclaimed ballet will be performed this season, by Ailey II, the young and gifted second company of the Alvin Ailey American Dance

ing the new and unknown. Faison salutes the vocal prowess of celebrated jazz artist Carter to paint a picture of those who recognize their differences in attitudes and life, but "move on" in spite of it all. The piece's vibrantly strong energy colors each step of the groundbreaking choreography, elevating the ballet to its current position in the company's repertoire.

For Faison, Carter represented all that was right with jazz singing and her adventurous scat style and distinctive interpretations put her on par with the other great ladies of jazz -- Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Billie Holiday and Carmen McRae.

Born in Washington, DC, Faison appeared in and choreographed numerous high school productions. He studied dentistry at Howard University, but after attending a concert by the Ailey Company he began to study and perform with the American Light Opera Company, the Capitol Ballet and with Professor Owen Dodson at Howard University where he met his mentor, Louis Johnson, who invited him to come to New York City where he soon joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

He formed his own dance company, The George Faison Universal Dance Experience in 1971. Company members in-



Movin' On-Ailey II Dancers in Movin' On

"City Kids," segments of the "Cosby" show, "Amen" and the "Oprah Winfrey" show in addition to some groundbreaking videos, "It's Raining Men" for the Weather Girls, "Oasis" for Roberta Flack, "Boogie Wonderland" for Earth, Wind & Fire and "Sounds" for Betty Carter.

He has directed and choreographed plays and musicals at numerous LORT Theaters and also directed several urban shows. He wrote or co-authored "Apollo It Was Just Like Magic...", "Sing, Mahalia, Sing!", "On Common Ground," "Harlem Hot and Sassy" and "Awakening."

In addition, he directed and choreographed a revival of "West Side Story" at the Lyric in Baltimore. He also choreographed the new musical "Tin Pan Alley Rag" at the Maltz Jupiter Theatre and choreographed, directed and wrote the book for the "If This Hat Could Talk" a glorious musical which celebrates women's contributions to the Civil Rights Movement.

The award-winning director/choreographer is the co-founder and artistic producing director at the Faison Firehouse Theater located in a former NYC Fire House in Central Harlem, where he will begin the inaugural season in May 2009 and where he

developed one of the most successful performing arts based urban youth programs, "The Firehouse Respect Project"®, inspired by Professor Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot's book of the same title and fully endorsed by her.

Faison continues to enjoy a fruitful relationship with the Ailey organization and his most recently restaged classic work "Suite Otis" for the AAAADT's 50th Anniversary season was met with over-the-top critical raves.

Faison's motto is "Its' only natural to keep working," and his work is the result of living his dreams. Some thirty years ago, he made a statement in an interview that has spanned the lifetime of his universal dance experience of exuberantly choreographed energy.

"We have one thing in common. O.K. we're gonna be purple and green and this and that and we're gonna change on each other as each day goes by but we have to remember that when we are alone and in our separate worlds, each and everyone of us still have dreams, and everybody would like to say, 'Oh, that's a white dream' or 'That's a black dream,' or this or that or the other, but we all look at TV, we all do practically the same things so very definitely we all dream. So how can we, therefore, deny our dreams. So, I just go about living mine," he said.

Faison is an inspiring example of an artist who takes from the sometimes ugly and hateful world around him and creates beauty. Whether choreographing a dance about slavery or drug abuse, or creating a tornado with dancers in "The Wiz," the dance impresario stayed true to himself and the result is a career three decades long and counting.

"I've wanted to do something positive, but people have felt I was a black activist when I recognized my roots," he once said. "I was interested in pop music. That turned some people off, but I found beauty in the ordinary and everyday," he added.



Movin' On-Betty Carter's music featured in Movin' On Ballet