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## For the Best Views of This Performance, Stake Out a Sidewalk Spot



John Marshall Mantel for The New York Times

Pedestrians often stop to watch dance classes at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater building at Ninth Avenue & 55th St.  
By [ANTHONY RAMIREZ](#)

The curtain rises just before 6:30 p.m. But the audience takes its time showing up.

On Friday night, inside Room 1-C of the [Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater](#) building, 19 dance students shimmied, shook, stomped and twirled to drums and an insistent whistle.

On the other side of Room 1-C's floor-to-ceiling windows, a woman took a picture with her cellphone. A wide-eyed toddler fogged the glass. And a horse-drawn carriage was stopped at a green light so its driver could squint for a better look.

Every weeknight, Alvin Ailey holds classes for the general public in ballet, hip-hop, Middle Eastern dance and other dance forms, including, on Friday, Afro-Cuban, the swaying dance and ecstatic music of the plantation workers of [Cuba](#). It is an eye-catching performance at the corner of Ninth Avenue and 55th Street, and passers-by — sometimes one, sometimes 30 — take in the free show.

For the Ailey theater, directed by Judith Jamison and founded in 1958 by the choreographer Alvin Ailey and a band of African-American dancers, it is a canny form of marketing, both for its professional performances and its adult education classes. The theater even built a roomy bench outside 1-C for spectators. (Rehearsals for the Ailey professional company are closed to the public.)

For the sidewalk-arts fan, it is the sweetest form of New York theater, polished yet spontaneous, top-notch yet accessible, a kind of amateur [Lincoln Center](#).

Carol Matthews, who owns a bakery in Columbus, Ohio, sat Friday night on the bench, eating and watching the class.

“I’ve got my cheese pizza, \$2, and I have my show,” Ms. Matthews said over the roar of Ninth Avenue traffic and the muffled bass of bongo drums behind the glass. “It’s very entertaining and very rejuvenating.”

Cees and Daisy van de Kreeke of the Netherlands, visiting New York on their honeymoon, held hands as they watched the class.

“You have to have guts to do this in front of all these people,” Mrs. van de Kreeke said.

Another spectator, Vickie Sanchez, 19, an archaeology student at [City University of New York](#), said, “I just had to look.”

The class is taught by Danis Perez Prades, who was a respected dancer and instructor in Cuba. Known as “La Mora,” or “the Moor,” Spanish slang for dark-skinned blacks, Ms. Perez is an expert in Afro-Cuban and Afro-Haitian dance.

Her husband, Francisco Mora, 59, a jazz musician, accompanies her on the bongo drums and cowbell. He also acts as Ms. Perez’s interpreter.

“The open window is stimulating for the students and a promotion for the class,” Ms. Perez said. “Nothing is better than a big window and a big audience.”

The class of mostly women (only three men were in Friday’s session) has “high talent and good spirits,” Ms. Perez said. Three-quarters of the students are strong intermediates or advanced, she said.

The skill showed even in the warm-up exercises. As the class slowly advanced, barefoot, flapping their arms like geese in slow-motion migration, they were synchronized with one another and seemingly with the traffic as it flowed south on Ninth Avenue.

About a half dozen people stopped and stared.

By 7:15 p.m., halfway through the class, there was a visitors-at-the-zoo feeling, as nearly all the space on the sidewalk and the bench was filled.

By the time the class was on to the more frenzied steps, like “gaga,” where a white sheet was twisted and stretched like a rope and dancers shimmied underneath, limbo-style, some spectators were open-mouthed and applauding.

“We have the option of closing the curtains should we choose to,” said Michael Adams, 32, a student in the class and a yoga instructor from Crown Heights, Brooklyn. “If you’re a beginner and you’re struggling with the movements, you might be a little less comfortable.”

He added, however, “Dance is not supposed to be shut up in a room all by itself.”