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The Guide And Spirit Of Ailey II Steps Down

By GIA KOURLAS

Somewhere near the top of the modern-dance family tree, where the foliage is plentiful, you'll find Sylvia Waters.

This season, after 38 years on the job, Ms. Waters will step down as artistic director of Ailey II, the second company of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, where her main triumph has been to cultivate dancers and nurture their inner stars. Ms. Waters's track record of spotting talent is astounding; at the moment, 65 percent of the main company comes from Ailey II.

"I'm sad," Ms. Waters said. "I'm going through a very interesting and strange transition."

Sitting behind her desk at the Ailey headquarters one afternoon last week, Ms. Waters paused to consider how to explain her decision to step down.

"It's the kind of job you could do almost forever," she said. "I've been with Ailey for such a long time — since 1968 — and it's not a matter of ego, but you don't want to be a fixture. I believe in renewal; I believe in change, I really do."

And Ms. Waters is not gone yet. Beginning on Wednesday at the Ailey Citigroup Theater, she presides over her final season directing the 12-member company in two programs that will showcase a fresh generation of dancers. It will also reveal the other side of her job: spotlighting choreographers. (It's how Robert Battle, the artistic director of the main company, entered the Ailey fold, in 1999.) This year's engage-

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ment includes works by Kyle Abraham, Donald Byrd, Stefanie Batten Bland and Troy Powell, her successor at Ailey II.

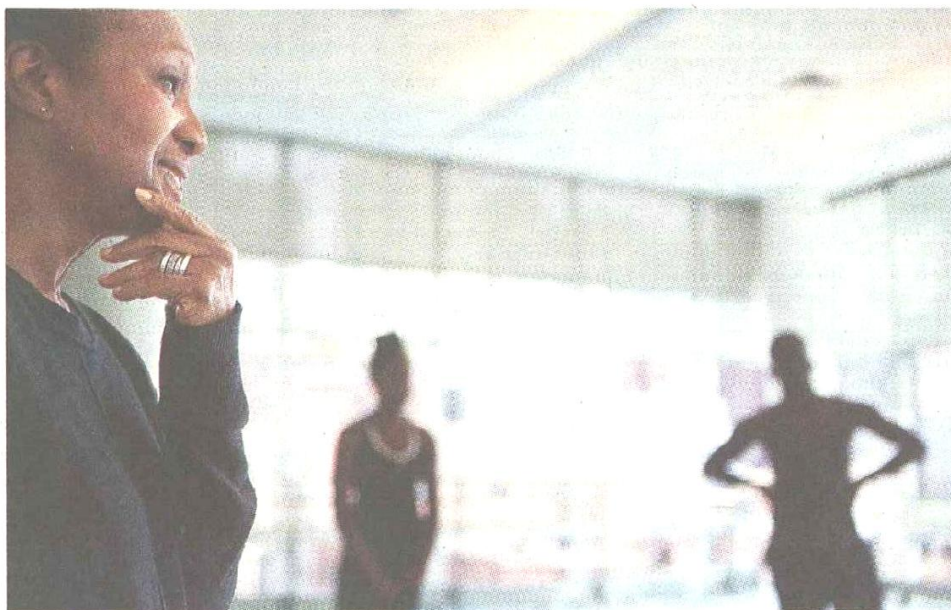
The announcement that Ms. Waters was leaving the Ailey organization has been somewhat disconcerting to the dance world. There has been a lot of change at Ailey recently. In addition to Mr. Battle's appointment to succeed Judith Jamison, Tracy Inman and Melanie Person became co-directors of the Ailey school in 2010. This year Sharon Gerstman Luckman, executive director of the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, announced that she would be stepping down too.

"It's like when you come to a party and — wow," Mr. Battle said. "It sounded like it was just cranking up when I got to the front door."

Mr. Battle, who remains close to Ms. Waters, added: "She definitely wanted it to be very clear to me that she's not leaving me, but that it's time for transition. Generally, it's bittersweet. She brought me into the family in the most meaningful way: as a young choreographer trying to find my way."

In a similar manner, the influence of Ms. Waters extends beyond the Ailey organization, since Ailey II alumni often find jobs beyond the troupe. "You might see a dancer and think they need to be in the main company, and she'll say, 'I think they need one more year with me,'" Mr. Battle said. "That's a strong statement in the sense of, is that holding

Ailey II performs Wednesday through April 29 at the Ailey Citigroup Theater, 405 West 55th Street, Clinton; (866) 811-4111, alvinailey.org.



TODD HEISLER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

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SYLVIA WATERS

Artistic director of Ailey II

a dancer back? But oftentimes she's right. So all of that is so valuable to the field, not just the Ailey company. I'm hoping to find other ways that we can expand on her eye."

Ms. Waters, who declined to give her age with a succinct, "I'm not timeless," gives off that aura nevertheless, with her pixie hair and no-nonsense warmth. She will stick close to Ailey, where her plans include working on archives as well as leading the Ailey Legacy Residency, a lecture, technique and reportory program for college students.

She was handpicked to run the second company by Alvin Ailey himself, who saw it was becoming difficult for Ms. Waters to raise a son while dancing in the main company. "I always say Alvin gave me a gift," she said.

They met when Ms. Waters, who was born in Harlem, was a teenager studying modern dance at the New Dance Group; one day Ailey was the substitute teacher for a class. "I remember him trying to get me to do the figure eight with my hips," she said. "He actually took my hips and did it."

Ms. Waters went on to study at Juilliard; during that time she saw the first performances of "Revelations" (1960) and "Blues Suite" (1958), two of Ailey's classic dances. After graduation she had problems finding a job and moved to Europe to perform in the show "Black Nativity." After the assassinations of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, in 1968, Ms. Waters said, she yearned to return to New York.

Her career as an Ailey dancer lasted from 1968 to 1974, when Ailey told her

that he wanted to start a group to prepare dancers for careers. "It was also a way of giving emerging choreographers a chance to have a body of dancers to set works on, like a laboratory," she said. "We weren't a company. Our main thrust was education and outreach."

One of Ailey II's first performances, she recalled, was at a prison in New Jersey. "They responded like we could have been at City Center," she said. "I was really moved. And I suddenly saw what kind of impact that could have on these lives."

Even now, as Ailey II continues to perform in hospitals and at schools, those performances reveal much to Ms. Waters. "I still have the same admiration and respect for the dancers, because they really do a performance," she said. "I mean, you get one or two who really haven't understood why they're there. Or maybe don't need to be there or want to be there. You have to really weed that out."

That is exactly what Ailey II accomplishes in the two years for which dancers are engaged. Ms. Waters chooses those who have a willingness and a need to reveal more than technique; they, in turn, are exposed to life as professionals, often touring to smaller cities that the main company doesn't get to.

"It's not an exact science," she said. "Choreographers are like chefs — they come in and design the playing field — and dancers have to know how to bend to that." What she's looking for, she said, is "that dancer who can really begin to step beyond his ego."

And even Ms. Waters has been wrong. "You can believe in someone's talent more than they believe it," she added. "Sometimes a dancer, depending on their background, may have baggage that you are not equipped to handle. And then there's the one who has all the equipment and squanders it. There have been some I couldn't reach."

After a moment's pause, Ms. Waters smiled. "I've lost a few," she said, "but not many."