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## THE Arts

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### Crank Up the Victrola And They'll All Dance

By JULIE BLOOM

Josephine Baker, Duke Ellington, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes. The giants of the Harlem Renaissance loom large in "Uptown," Matthew Rushing's new work for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. But until last year, Mr. Rushing, a veteran dancer who created the piece, wasn't aware of the extent of their influence on today's culture.

"I remember going on YouTube, just researching the Charleston, and there was a clip where they compared the Charleston to styles of break dance," he said. "There's a con-



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Matthew Rushing has choreographed his first solo work for the Alvin Ailey company.

nection," he continued, adding later, "We are because these people lived and struggled and gave their all as performers, people, intellectuals."

That connection is what Mr. Rushing hopes to communicate with "Uptown," his first solo creation for the company, which has its premiere Wednesday night at City Center.

Structured as an episodic tour through Harlem in the 1920s, "Uptown" uses 28 dancers — the entire company except for Mr. Rushing and Renee Robinson, who helped him in the staging — and tries to bring to life through dance the rich artistic activity of that era. Along the way, the audience, led by a narrator, encounters characters both real and fictional, and scenes — a busy street, a rent party, a night at the Savoy ballroom — that help introduce major developments in music, literature, the visual arts and, of course, dance.

He initially came up with the idea while surfing for jazz music online. "I learned so much that I did not know, to the point that I was almost ashamed," Mr. Rushing said. "And then I started to talk to people and they didn't know either, and that's when I realized I needed to do this piece."

Mr. Rushing, 36, has choreo-

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# Crank Up the Victrola, and They'll Dance in an Ailey Tribute to 1920s Giants

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graphed for Ailey before — in 2005 he worked with two other company dancers, Hope Boykin and Abdur-Rahim Jackson, to create "Acceptance in Surrender" — but "Uptown" represents a major step for him in its scale and complex production. It also represents the company's continuing efforts to cultivate artists from within, especially coming as it does in a season of many revivals and just a few new works by outside choreographers.

At the start of 2008 Judith Jamison, the company's artistic director, approached Mr. Rushing about choreographing a piece for this season, planned as a tribute to her 20 years as leader of the company. "I wanted to give him the opportunity for his singular voice to shine," Ms. Jamison said in a phone interview. "Matthew has a sense of theater to me and his piece is like a review — you

## Charleston, the Big Apple and lots of other stops in a tour of Harlem history.

get a chance to go on this journey."

In a spacious rehearsal studio at the Ailey headquarters on West 55th Street, three female dancers move in a row to a big band sound. Their hips sway as they trace half circles sensually with their toes on the floor; their arms hang heavily above their heads — clinking glasses and moody nightclub lighting are easy to picture. The studio is crowded with dancers and an audience of Ailey administrators and supporters, including Ms. Jamison, who watch attentively as Mr. Rushing, in a gray hoodie, black sweat pants and bedroom booties, coaches the dancers: "There are no counts. You have to feel it."

Mr. Rushing, who has been called "a fine classicist" and a "virtuoso dancer" by The New York Times in his 18 years performing with the company, has a sweet, almost angelic air in person. Sitting, appropriately, in the company's library after the rehearsal, he talked about the lengths he went to to represent the era authentically.

Driven in part by an injury that kept him from going on tour with the company for several months last year, Mr. Rushing spent hours at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem and the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center. He watched YouTube clips, the Ken Burns documentary on jazz — he even



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Abdur-Rahim Jackson, at left, and Antonio Douthit of the Alvin Ailey troupe rehearsing Matthew Rushing's "Uptown."



STAN HONDA/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Matthew Rushing in Judith Jamison's "Among Us (Private Spaces: Public Places)."

loaded a picture of a painting by Archibald J. Motley Jr., which would eventually appear in the piece, onto his phone. He also scoured vintage clothing shops from Paris to South Carolina to gather material for the costumes. His obsessiveness helped earn Ms. Jamison's support for the piece. "I knew he would be absolutely meticulous about his preparation," she said.

In keeping with his desire to educate the audience, Mr. Rushing added textual elements, with the help of a librettist and lyricist, Gregor L. Gibson, most of which are spoken by the narrator, Victor, named after the Victrola phonograph. "There's only so much education that you can put out there through dance without giving people words to remember," Mr. Rushing said. "I wanted to present the information in a way that's easy to digest, and that's why this character has all this style and animation and excitement about him and it also pertains to that time. They were

### ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

Images of the costume designs for Matthew Rushing's new piece, "Uptown": [nytimes.com/dance](http://nytimes.com/dance)

song and dance people."

Hope Clarke, a choreographer whose credits include "Jelly's Last Jam" on Broadway and who is something of a specialist in the era, was brought in to help the narrator get those characteristics just right — a combination of lion tamer, Southern preacher and master of ceremonies. She also worked with the other dancers on accents — instead of standing so straight, "plié," she advised, and smile more. Despite their characters' difficult daily lives, "when they got into the ballroom, there was a certain joy that they would express," she said. She also told them "to enjoy the movement all the way through the body as opposed to pieces of the body, it's like a juice that runs through."

Mr. Rushing was so intent on accurately representing the specific dance styles that he enlisted an expert in American vernacular dance, Clyde Wilder, to teach him the jitterbug, the Shim Sham, a kind of swing line dance, and the Big Apple, a group dance with complicated footwork similar to the Lindy Hop. But Mr. Rushing also wanted to incorporate contemporary movement. There are moments, for instance a solo featuring the dancer Clifton Brown as Langston Hughes, that use more modern and jazz technique.

"Choreography is definitely a passion of mine," Mr. Rushing said, but he added that it was less an end than "a great tool to get connected to artists and a great teaching tool as well."

All the while Mr. Rushing was working as a choreographer, he was also dancing, performing in, among other pieces, all the new works this season. It was quite a challenge: "I come to class, take class with my fellow dancers. Then at 12 I become a choreogra-

pher; then at 3 I turn back into a pumpkin. Three to 4 I have lunch. Then from 4 to 7 I'm dancing next to the people I've been bossing around for the first three hours. So, it's really weird," he said.

"The whole experience was very humbling, being in front of the room and taking on the position of a leader," he said. "I was reminded of how to be a follower as well."

That realization was one of Ms. Jamison's goals when she commissioned Mr. Rushing, as she has other dancers. "They can get a sense of what it feels like to be on the other side," she said. "So to put the shoe on the other foot is what this exercise is about, and it's important for dancers. In Alvin's era, in Lester Horton's era, they knew how to sew costumes; everyone knew the insides and outsides of what they were doing. This is an exercise in trying to know as much about the process and everything that's involved in producing a piece."