

Interview: Sylvia Waters, 'mother' of the Alvin Ailey dance company family

As the youngsters of the Alvin Ailey dance company family make their first trip across the Atlantic, Kelly Apter meets their 'mother', Sylvia Waters

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By Kelly Apter



THEY'RE young, talented, athletic and - for the first time in almost 40 years - they're over here. About to make its UK debut at Glasgow's King's Theatre, Ailey 2 is the youth wing of the hugely popular Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Starting life in 1974 as a low-key workshop for aspiring young dancers, the company has grown into a major player on the American dance scene. Comprising six male and six female dancers aged between 17 and 22, Ailey 2 is like a microcosm of the main company. It's also the perfect place to learn about the real world.

"Ailey 2 is primarily a training ground, but it really reaches beyond that," says the company's artistic director, Sylvia Waters. "The dancers are so good that I'm basically helping them do better what they already do very well. Also, being in a company is a lifestyle, and touring is a unique way to live and travel. So having this experience of being on the road and performing for all kinds of audiences, is an opportunity for them to really hone their craft."

A former dancer with the main company, Waters was hand-picked by Ailey himself to set up the young troupe. Back in 1974, she was mother to a two-year-old son, and the heavy touring schedule of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was taking its toll. Keen to keep her in the fold, Ailey suggested she spend more time at the company's New York headquarters, training the next generation of dancers. Ironically, Ailey 2 became so successful, Waters found herself out on tour almost as much as before. But her pride in what the company has achieved is palpable.

When we meet in her office, on the administrative floor of the stunning Ailey building in Manhattan, it's hard to believe that Waters turned 70 in 2010. Working with a steady flow of teenagers has clearly kept her young. Quick to smile, and exuding a genuine sense of kindness, it's easy to see why Waters has been the ideal "mother" for the Ailey 2 dancers. One of the biggest - and most sensitive - tasks she takes on is finding new talent, plucking just 12 dancers from hundreds of hopefuls in the Ailey School.

"The dancers in Ailey 2 are selected - they don't audition," explains Waters. "Because they audition when they come into the Ailey School, and then I see them in workshops, sometimes I teach them in class - quite honestly, every day is an audition for them."

Each dancer stays with Ailey 2 for two years, with many of them graduating to the main company. This means they not only need technical prowess to go the distance, but a strong work ethic and ability to get along with others in the Ailey "family".

"I'm looking for something rather personal," says Waters. "It's not just about high legs and wonderful backs - yes, that's important - but it's how they use that facility, how they comprehend who they are. The amount of growth and development that takes place during their two years with Ailey 2 is amazing."

For years, Ailey 2 only performed on home turf, building up a loyal fanbase in the United States, but they were virtually unheard of abroad. That's all set to change when the company embarks on its first UK tour.

As ever, despite her years, Waters will be on the tour bus with them - or, as she calls it, "out there in the trenches". Aside from ensuring the dancers are fit and healthy, their movement polished and precise, Waters also has some housekeeping to do.

"We hold our preliminary meeting - rules of the road, of the bus, of the airport, of the hotel," she says.

And do the dancers pay attention to those rules? "Most of the time," she says, smiling, "but they're young people. I've had some upstart issues, but in the last five years, they've been so focused on just being the best they can be. Life on the road isn't easy, but they work hard - and they're very, very skilled at what they do."

As with the main company, all Ailey 2 shows end with Alvin's legendary Revelations - a mighty weight for young shoulders to carry. With new dancers passing through her hands every two years, all of whom need to learn repertoire and responsibility, it's safe to say boredom is not an option for Waters. "The dancers are representing both themselves and a major organisation," she says. "So I have to make them aware of the gravity of the situation, but also make sure they have fun and live, that's what life is for. They're so sensitive and disciplined and vulnerable, yet they have that ego - they could never step on stage without it. There's all that going on in their young psyche, so for me, it's never dull."