

Harlem Renaissance inspires Ailey choreographer

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Dancer Matthew Rushing has been with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater since 1992, but he has only recently started spreading his wings as a choreographer.

Rushing's nascent choreographic career got a big boost when Ailey's artistic director, Judith Jamison, asked him to create something for the company's current tour, which honors Jamison's 20th year at the helm.

The result is "Uptown," a celebration of the people and culture of the Harlem Renaissance. The work will be shown during Ailey's six-day stay at the Orange County Performing Arts Center, which also features the iconic "Revelations" and other works from the 52-year-old company's considerable repertoire.

We talked to Rushing about his career and the experience of choreographing his biggest work so far.

The Orange County Register: How did you chose the subject for "Uptown"?

Matthew Rushing: Well, Judith asked me a while ago to be part of the 20th anniversary celebration as one of the choreographers. Immediately I started looking for subject matter. My original idea fell through, and I found myself looking for new ideas after several months. At the same time I got injured. When the company was on an international tour I stayed home and had a lot of free time on my hands. I went to the New York City Public Library's dance collection and the Schomburg Center (for Research in Black Culture). I always had an interest in the Harlem Renaissance (a flowering of African American culture in 1920s and '30s Harlem). I found this treasure trove of information. I knew about it, but not the specifics and details. When I ran across this material it confirmed that this subject would be perfect for me.

Register: How did you sort through the rich source material and decide what to focus on?

Rushing: I told myself I would try to touch upon each discipline within the performing or literary arts. I went down the line. I tried to find who and what I could translate through dance.

Register: Tell us about some of the Harlem Renaissance elements you chose to explore as a choreographer.

Rushing: When it got to visual arts, I ran into a painting called "The Jazz Singers" by Archibald Motley. I looked at it, a scene with five guys, and thought it would be great to bring this painting to life. Then I went to literary arts. I wanted to pay tribute to W. E. B. DuBois and Zora Neale Hurston. Then I went on to events that happened, like rent parties. Fats Waller played at rent parties – that was almost like killing two birds with one stone. I ran across information about "Shuffle Along," the first black-produced musical on Broadway. From this musical, Eubie Blake came up with the song "I'm

Just Wild About Harry." I loved that. I also touched upon the Savoy Ballroom as well as the Cotton Club and Josephine Baker.

Register: 'Uptown' must be complicated. What does it look like?

Rushing: I think altogether there are 15 dancers. There is a great deal of costume and scene changes. There are nine sections in the ballet, short vignettes of each thing I wanted to touch upon; that was another challenge. I wanted the costumes to be as authentic as possible. This time period had amazing style as far as fashion is concerned. Wardrobe person John Taylor and I were going to vintage shops around the world – any place we could find a good vintage shop.

Register: Do you use a lot of the music of that era in your score?

Rushing: There was a tremendous financial challenge. Once we got through the process of finding songs, the rights became too expensive. I wanted to use Ellington and Count Basie and other masters of that time. The company's general manager, Calvin Hunt, said, "Why don't you get a good composer and actually get new music that's representative of this time?" I came across a great composer, Ted Rosenthal, who teaches at Juilliard and the Manhattan School of Music. He was familiar with the time period and the Ailey company. I thought he was the perfect choice. He came up with compositions that were authentic.

Register: This tour honors Judith Jamison. What do you think are her greatest accomplishments as the company's director?

Rushing: One of her greatest accomplishments has been making the company a household name. Before joining the company I remember it was very popular. But there's popularity that it has accomplished under her leadership that has surpassed any other modern concert dance company. We are known around the world. We've been called cultural ambassadors. That is a huge responsibility and also a huge honor: To know that you are trusted to represent the U.S.A. no matter where you go.

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