

ART BEAT

After 31 Years, Robinson Takes Final Bow

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By Imani M. Cheers

For more than three decades, taking in a performance by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre meant not only experiencing some of the best of the art form, but also seeing the work of one dancer: Renee Robinson. Now, she is taking her final bows.

Robinson, who was hand-picked by founder Alvin Ailey, is the longest tenured female dancer in the company's history, the only member to have performed with all three artistic directors and is affectionately known by her colleagues as "the quintessential Ailey dancer." Known as the "women with the umbrella" in Ailey's signature work "Revelations," Robinson was recently awarded the 2012 Dance Magazine Award.

Although Robinson officially retired in December 2012, her farewell performances have taken her through the company's annual run this week at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., her hometown. Art Beat sat down with Robinson to discuss her early dancing days, her iconic role in "Revelations," working with Ailey and why now is the time to retire.



Renee Robinson performs in Alvin Ailey's "Cry." Photo by Christopher Duggan.

ART BEAT: Did you always know you were going to be a professional dancer?

RENEE ROBINSON: I actually thought I was going to be an attorney. Growing up in Washington, D.C., I was surrounded by politics. While attending New York University, I majored in dance but minored in economics. I loved dance and I thought I could dance at a higher level, but it was definitely not in my thoughts that it would be a profession. After my freshman year at NYU I needed to do something during the summer, so I went to an Alvin Ailey school audition and I got a scholarship for the summer. After that I was accepted at the Ailey school and my whole world changed. I was starting to learn other techniques besides just classical ballet and I was hooked. I learned more about Mr. Ailey and the inner workings of his company, and I knew that's where I wanted to be.

ART BEAT: What's your favorite dance genre?

RENEE ROBINSON: The first dance technique I learned was classical ballet as a student at the Jones Haywood School of Ballet [in Washington, D.C.] when I was 10. I really enjoyed my school, I liked my teachers and instructors and I loved the seriousness of dance. I liked the poetry of it. I found that I enjoyed the intense training and required focus to connect my thoughts with my movements. When I joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, Mr. Ailey wanted dancers who could do it all, have a modern top and a classical bottom so I learned to love all styles and genres of dance.

ART BEAT: What was it like working with Alvin Ailey?

RENEE ROBINSON: As a young dancer it was exciting, but nerve wracking. He was so revered that it was a bit intimidating, but I loved that he was always talking to the dancers and telling stories of his life growing up in the South. He wanted the audiences to have an experience when seeing the company -- outside of the dancers' exquisite technique and beautiful bodies. Mr. Ailey believed that dance is for the people and should be assessable to everyone. Through master classes, children's performances and the Ailey School, we want to continue and honor Mr. Ailey's legacy by truly making this art form available to all. A wide selection of opportunities are offered to the public, including fitness classes and the Ailey Extension, which opens the door to people of all dance backgrounds.



ART BEAT: How does it feel to be known as "the women with the umbrella" in the signature work, "Revelations"?

RENEE ROBINSON: I remember when I was told I was going to do it, I was terribly excited and, of course, very nervous. After all, I was taking over a role once danced by the famed Judith Jamison, the principal dancer and star of the company who at the time was personally tapped by Mr. Ailey as his successor and Artistic Director. I knew how important the role was to Mr. Ailey and can remember one of his famous stories of seeing a woman carrying a parasol at an outdoor processional. The parasol was used to keep the sun off the person who was going to be baptized. That significance is huge to me and it's a blessing to be known for my role in that iconic piece.

ART BEAT: Why did you decide to retire?

RENEE ROBINSON: The decision to retire was super hard. I don't think I'll process retirement until I actually stop dancing. I'm still having a good time in the company and I did recognize that the dance gods were still blessing me to be able to get out on the stage and be a part of this generation's voice and not look too bad doing it. But I know that with the company I work for, the ballets don't get any easier. There are times when they're tougher than other times, when the costumes come in smaller and tighter. You ask yourself, 'Do I still look good?' It's all of those things and none of those things at the same time.

I know I want to continue to revisit places I visited as a dancer. I know I want to continue to try and make my Spanish and French better because I'm super interested in being able to speak more than one language. I like to be able to communicate wherever I go. My focus for now is on the work. I don't want to be distracted with my other inner voice saying, 'Where are we going next?' So what I know is that I'll be dancing for these farewell shows in Atlanta, D.C. and Boston, and after that I'm open to the universe.

