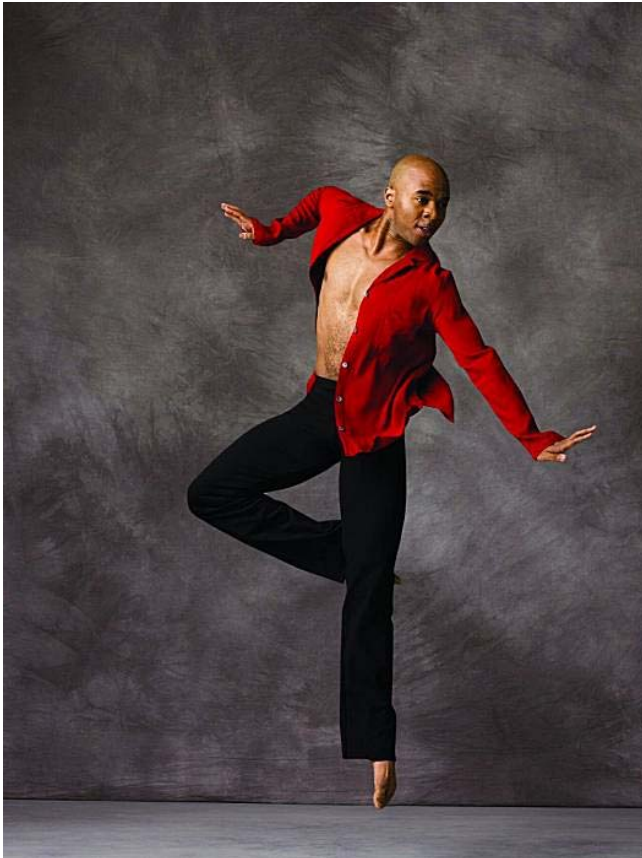


# San Francisco Chronicle

## History guides Matthew Rushing to plot future



Andrew Eccles

Matthew Rushing spent months getting his solo choreography into presentable form for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. "I was in a time warp, and it was addictive," he says.

Allan Ulrich, Chronicle Dance Correspondent  
Friday, March 5, 2010

In the professional dancer's life, which is always circumscribed by the realities of aging, a sustained injury strikes some performers as a death sentence. But when Matthew Rushing was sidelined from a European tour with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, he refused to mope. The past beckoned to him, and, perhaps, the future called, too.

"I had a lot of time on my hands. I was really intrigued by the Harlem Renaissance, and I started researching it," recalls the veteran Ailey star, in a call from Atlanta, one of this year's tour cities. "I checked out people like Duke Ellington and Josephine Baker, watched a lot of stuff on YouTube, and I wanted to dig further."

That he did when Ailey's artistic director, Judith Jamison, asked Rushing if he would choreograph a work to celebrate her 20th anniversary helming the company. He jumped at the opportunity. The result was "Uptown," a musical and movement journey through the Harlem Renaissance, that uniquely creative flowering of African American artists that began in the 1920s, continued through the 1930s, and in Rushing's opinion, has influenced our lives to this day.

"That period in jazz music was really the start of pop culture," he says. "The jazz and the poetry and the visual arts became not just the voice of black America, but the voice of America, period. The Harlem Renaissance gave us a power to be seen in places where we wouldn't normally have been seen or heard."

Warmly received at its New York premiere in December, "Uptown" highlights Tuesday's opening night of the Ailey company's annual Cal Performances visit. Only Rushing and senior dancer Renee Robinson will be absent from the piece, which features a narration, as well as the stylish costumes, visual art, and, not least, the music of that glorious period. The choreographer still sounds slightly dazed by the fact that he put it together on a limited budget and with only three weeks' rehearsal time.

Actually, Rushing spent months getting the work into presentable form. He camped out at Harlem's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and Lincoln Center's Performing Arts Library. "I was in a time warp, and it was addictive," he says. He scoured vintage clothing stores here and in Paris for the fabulous costumes that defined the Harlem Renaissance. He hired swing dance expert Clyde Wilder to steep the company in the social dances of the period.

Then, there was the music. Like so many fledgling choreographers, Rushing suffered a rude awakening when he learned about pesky things like rights and royalties. Ultimately, budgetary considerations forced

a compromise. Some of the music will be the genuine article, but much will be a new score, composed by Ted Rosenthal, "in the spirit of the originals."

Rushing set himself a few goals in his first solo choreography for Ailey. "I wanted to entertain, to emulate and to be authentic," he states. "I wanted to educate my generation (Rushing is 36), which probably doesn't know as much about this era as they should. Have they ever heard about rent parties or swing dancing or Zora Neale Hurston? This was the beginning of our race's acceptance as great artists."

To the delight of the company's fans, Rushing's new venture won't keep him from dancing during the Berkeley run. He has been at it for 18 years with Ailey, his only professional home. A Los Angeles native, he was smitten in high school when his mother took him to a company performance that included the classic "Revelations."

"I had never had an experience in the theater like that, where I could so relate to what was going on," Rushing says. "I have a very strong spiritual background, and a lot of the things I lived I saw on the stage."

Rushing flew to Berkeley to audition for the Ailey school and found himself with a full scholarship. Soon after the school's summer intensive, he was recruited by the junior company (now Ailey II), where he was on a two-year contract. After one year there, Jamison appointed him to the senior troupe.

Like most Ailey personnel, Rushing expresses mixed emotions about her imminent retirement from the director post.

"It's a bittersweet feeling," he says. "Most of us were brought into the company by Ms. Jamison; we see her as our artistic mother. No matter how high the public's expectations of the Ailey company, her expectations are even higher. She pushes us to constantly reassess our artistry and our craft."

"The sweet part of it is, and Ms. Jamison has helped us to see it this way, is that she's not going anywhere. She will be around to coach and raise money. Her presence will be felt." {sbox}

**Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater:** Tuesday through next Sunday. Zellerbach Hall, UC Berkeley. \$36-\$62. (510) 642-9998. [www.calperfs.berkeley.edu](http://www.calperfs.berkeley.edu).

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This article appeared on page Q - 20 of the San Francisco Chronicle*