



BEAUTY IN MOTION
Sims performs Twyla
Tharp's *The Golden
Section*.

A singular sensation

At Alvin Ailey, Linda Celeste Sims is the busiest dancer of them all.
By Gia Kourlas

It's funny to hear Linda Celeste Sims say that she never imagined she would end up at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater because she basically is Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. During the company's current City Center run, Sims, a tiny dancer of astounding power and depth, will appear on nearly every program. "I do *Memoria* three times in the first week," she notes with a weary laugh. "It's hard to be Linda." Sims, whose father is Dominican and mother Nicaraguan, grew up in the Bronx and trained at La Guardia High School and Ballet Hispanico, where she danced for two years. In 1996, she joined Ailey. During a packed day of rehearsals, Sims, 32, spoke about her singular dancing.

How did Ailey happen?

I had a friend who said, "You've got to audition for Ailey." I never thought I'd make it there, but one

day, my roommate said, "They're having an audition, and I want you to come with me." I went, but I didn't think I was going to get it. There were 144 girls that day. They needed *one girl!* [Laughs] First cut, I'm still there. Second cut, third cut, I'm still there. At the end, I realized, Wow—there are only eight girls in here, and I'm still here! And that's when I woke up and really went for it. [Artistic director] Judi [Jamison] said, "Go change." I thought she was going to say, "Thank you, you're lovely," or something, and so I took my time changing. I'm *such* a dingleberry. Judi came in the dressing room and said, "Well, what's taking you so long?" I remember running out. She said, "Would you take the contract?" She showed me around and gave me a list of countries for the tour that Ailey was going to do. It was Egypt, Israel, Greece, Germany, France. Could you believe that? Egypt!?

That must have been one crazy day.

I've been at Ailey since 1996. And this is where I met the love of my life. The very next year, Glenn Sims came into the company. [Laughs] Have you seen him dance? Or us dance together?

Of course.

A lot of my friends who went to La Guardia ended up going to Juilliard. He did. So we had the same posse of friends, but never met. Isn't that weird? I think it was good. I said, "I don't think you were ready for me then." We got married in 2001.

"I dance different. I have to say that to myself because sometimes I don't believe it."

What was surprising about the Ailey repertory?

When I came here, I was learning seven ballets in a week. [Whispers] Do you know what that's like? I remember I would sit down and literally pass out. Knock out, pass out. The only thing that was different was getting a little bit more grounded. Judi would say, "Just feel the floor a little bit more." That was my note for a good four or five months. And then I figured it out.

Who did you watch in the company?

It's funny because after that first year, a big group left. It was a huge transition. I don't want to give names because they weren't my idols. There were people way back when that I looked up to: Sarita Allen and Judith Jamison. I picked up a lot of Sarita Allen roles and I watched a lot of old tapes. I love the way she moves—there's sensuality, but it's not vulgar and sexy. That's how I like to move and interpret dance. Ballet is so sexy. Dance is sexy, and not in a [lowers voice] sexy, sensual way, but in the way that it just feels luxurious.

Is there any part of your dancing that no one talks about?

How I do all this work. I am on all the time. There are days when I do three techs in a day and techs are performances because there are cameras. And then I have to do it again that night. I don't complain, but it is very hard. I love to dance. I like everything that I do, so I don't want them to go, "I'm not going to let her learn that." No. I want to do it—I work so hard. I dance different than other people—not better, not worse, but I dance different. *I'm* different. I have to say that to myself because sometimes I don't believe it.

You are. And your musicality is different—that's what I love.

You know how dancers count? I hate counting. You wanna know the step? I'll give you the step, and I'll tell you when it happens in the music. I'll sing it, but I never count. You have to feel the music and be the music. You want to be able to feel what that dancer is feeling and you can tell when someone counts. It's dead. It's not melodious, it's not a song; it's like you're singing off the beat. Musicality can be on the rhythm or you may be holding back so it's a little late, but then you catch it. It's phrasing.

And you change the phrasing every time you go out, even when it's taped music, which is kind of a miracle.

I do. But each day you feel different. Some days, I feel so on and there are other days when I just feel a little bit softer, a little calmer, and maybe I'd rather ride it. You have to be honest and realistic as a dancer. I try to be as close to myself as I can be. It's very hard—not to force it, but to just be.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs at City Center through Jan 4. For web extras, visit timeoutnewyork.com.