

Baltimore dancer steps into role with prestigious Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre BSA alum Jacqueline Green, 22, comes back home for Lyric performance

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By Mary Carole McCauley

Gifted with a mother's second sight, Catherine Johnson knew her daughter Jacqueline Green better than the child knew herself. In 2004, the eighth-grader insisted she had absolutely zero desire to study dance. "Oh, Mom," she said, rolling her eyes. "Why would I want to do that?"

Nonetheless, at her mother's prodding and though she had never taken a dance class in her life, she auditioned for the Baltimore School of the Arts. On Tuesday, the 22-year-old Green will return to her hometown for the first time as a member of the main company of **Alvin Ailey** Dance Theatre, one of America's premier modern dance troupes.

"The first year at the School for the Arts, my teachers kept doing all these things to my body," Green said. "They'd grab my leg and lift it, try to make my foot point. A few of us were new to ballet, and we had to work so hard to catch up. But somewhere along the line, I fell in love with dance. I don't know how my mother knew. But thank God she did."

Ailey II, the company's junior ensemble of apprentice dancers, visits Baltimore every few years, often at Artscape. In addition, the main company has a longstanding annual gig at Washington's Kennedy Center. But the two-day visit to the Modell Performing Arts Center at the Lyric will be the first time since 1994 that Baltimore's dance fans will be able to see Ailey's top-tier troupe without having to travel to D.C. Despite a less-than-ideal schedule — the performances are being held Tuesday and Wednesday nights — Lyric administrators had no trouble selling out the 2,564-seat theater.

Sandy Richmond, the Lyric's president and executive director, said that the recent \$12.9 million renovation of the historic theater made it possible to lure the main company to Baltimore after an absence of nearly two decades.

"During the renovation, we added 25 feet in width and 6 feet in depth to the stage," he said. "We brought in counterweights to raise and lower scenery, replacing the old sandbag system. We've been talking to other nationally known dance companies and hope to book some of them for future seasons. Now that we are modernized, we are a great venue for dance."

Tuesday's performance also marks a homecoming for Alicia Graf Mack, a native of Columbia and one of the troupe's bona fide stars. Mack left the company in 2008 because of an injury. But last spring, she had healed enough to perform a duet during a celebration for the company's departing artistic director, Judith Jamison.

"I started plotting that night," said Ailey's artistic director, Robert Battle. "We were in the studio. My mouth fell open and I said, 'Oh my God, this girl needs to be dancing.' As soon as Alicia got on stage and around the dancers and the energy of this company, I think she wanted to come back, so I didn't have to plot too much."

The two-day visit will also provide Baltimore with its first glimpse of the 53-year-old company under Battle, who became just the third artistic director in Ailey's history last fall.

Battle moved quickly to make his mark, introducing his dancers to choreographers from unfamiliar genres. For instance, he commissioned a piece about AIDS from hip-hop choreographer Rennie Harris. The number, called "Home," will be performed to house and gospel music.

"I thought that hip-hop would be the unexpected quantity in the conversation about AIDS," Battle said. "I've seen a lot of modern dance choreographed on that topic, but I haven't seen a lot of hip-hop. It's a celebration of life. It's not gloomy."

The program will also include the company's signature work, "Revelations," which traces African-Americans' journey from slavery through a series of dances set to spirituals and the blues. In addition, the Ailey dancers will perform three short pieces choreographed by Battle: "Takademe," "The Hunt" and "In/Side."



Baltimore's Jacqueline Green performs in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, which comes to the Modell Arts Center at the Lyric. (Gert Krautbauer)