

The Berkshire Eagle

Love affair with dance

Sylvia Waters is holding on to her vision

By Jeffrey Borak, Berkshire Eagle Staff

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GREAT BARRINGTON

The way Ailey II artistic director Sylvia Waters sees it, "dance is a profession that chooses you." Waters became one of the chosen as a junior high school student in Harlem learning time steps at the hands of a tough gym teacher.

At the age of 12, Waters joined an after-school dance group. At 14, she joined the New Dance Group, where she had her first exposure to the work of Alvin Ailey, among other dance pioneers. "I was smitten," Waters said by telephone from her New York apartment.

It's been a full-blown love affair ever since. Dance hasn't let go of Waters any more than she's let go of dance.

She studied at Juilliard and then with Martha Graham and Donald McKayle. She moved to Paris and toured Europe as a young dancer. In 1968, she returned to the United States and joined Alvin Ailey's American Dance Theater. Then, in 1974, Ailey chose Waters to become artistic director of Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble, known now as Ailey II. In the 36 years Waters has been in charge, Ailey II has not lost sight of its mission as a company in which young dancers can hone their skills in a professional setting. It may bear Ailey's name but the 12-member company clearly has shaped its own personality, a personality that will be on display Sunday afternoon at 3 at Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center. The program will include a work by a fresh young choreographer, two-time Princess Grace Award-winner thang Dao; a solo created by Christopher Huggins ("an emerging energizing choreographer," Waters says); a piece for four dancers by former Ailey II dancer Carlos de Santos; and "Divining" by Judith Jamison, honoring Jamison's 20th anniversary as artistic director of the 51-year-old senior company.

Ailey's original idea in forming a second company, Waters said, was to create a workshop in which he could develop new work that eventually would transfer to the main company.

"He was touring a great deal and he was beginning work on the Ailey Ellington Celebration. There wasn't enough time," Waters said. "That worked for a while."

He chose Waters, she said, "because I had been a company member for some time and he knew I was starting a family and touring was difficult for me. He was extremely accessible. He knew I loved the company."

"All the artistic decisions were mine. He was the artistic advisor. Sometimes we agreed, sometimes we didn't. But it all worked out in ways we never could have expected."

No longer a workshop, Ailey II is a proving ground for dancers who are younger, less experienced than the dancers in the senior company.

"The energy level is not seasoned, not honed," Waters said. "The plan is to help them do something better than they already know how to do. These are not recital time dancers."

The prospect of supervising a company of headstrong young dancers who are raring to go was frightening, Waters acknowledged. It still can be, even after 36 years.

"You have responsibility for everything young talent demonstrates -- good and bad," she said. "You want the guidance you give to be right for them. These young dancers are savvy and open, extremely challenging. It's like being a parent all over again."

"Still," she says, "it's given me an opportunity to stretch myself and stay in dance."

More than 80 percent of the dancers in the senior company come from Ailey II. Other Ailey II alumni have appeared on Broadway and/or gone on to work with, among others, David Parsons, Alonzo King's LINES, Elisa Monte, Ronald K. Brown/Evidence.

For this 2009-10 tour, Ailey II is carrying 12 pieces to 45 cities.

In addition to performances, part of Ailey II's mission involves community outreach through workshops and student performances. To that end, following its regular Sunday performance Ailey II will give a special performance Monday morning at 10 at the Mahaiwe for students from various schools throughout the area.



Ailey II, founded as the junior company for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, brings its own...
Friday March 19, 2010

Dance has been good to Waters and she knows it. She's been honored many times over -- including a BESSIE Award in 2003 and a Dance Magazine Award in 2008 -- for her accomplishments. She's danced, studied and/or worked with pioneers in the field -- Ailey, Graham, McKayle, Béjart, Dove, Byrd. She's currently a visiting professor at Harvard. "When I was starting," she said, "I never thought I'd be where I am or that I'd work with the people I've worked with. "I feel blessed to be part of the growth of this company (Ailey II).

"I feel very blessed to be with a company (the Ailey) that's been established and held its ranks for so long.

"You know, we were never concerned with legacy. We just went on from day to day, year to year, happy to be doing it."

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On stage

Who: Ailey II

What: Modern dance

When: Sunday 3 p.m.

Where: Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center, 14 Castle St., Great Barrington

Tickets: \$47; \$37 (members); \$12 (youth under 18)

How: (413) 528-0100; www.mahaiwe.org; at the box office