

The Pantagraph

D2 • The Pantagraph • Thursday, January 29, 2009

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Ailey dancers bring energy, youth to stage

By Dan Craft

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Meet Renaldo Gardner, the “baby” of the Ailey II bunch — the dozen-strong dance troupe poised to transform the Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts stage into a fantasia of bodily movement Friday night.

Stand aside and make way.

They’re among the best and most energetic of their breed.

Amazingly, a year ago this time, Renaldo Gardner was just a high school senior from Gary, Ind. Today, he’s one of that elite dozen heralded by one of the seminal names in American modern dance.

While Gardner may be the “toddler” of the bunch, there isn’t that much yearly mileage separating him from the high-energy troupe’s eldest performer, all of 25.

Youth and energy is what Ailey II — a touring company of the New York-based Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre — is all about.

Accordingly, Gardner was up on his toes, moving to the music, at age 5. Several years later, at “the little performing arts school” he attended in Gary, he came across some videocassettes in the school library.

They featured performances by, yes, the Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre.

“I watched them,” he recalls. “Then I told myself: ‘This is my dream; this is what I want



Eighteen-year-old Renaldo Gardner, right, is the youngest member of the Ailey II dance troupe coming Friday to the Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts.

to do. I want to be in the Ailey company.”

Gardner says he connected immediately with the Ailey aesthetic: “a type of dance that’s so emotional, that’s so deeply rooted inside the body.”

He throws around words like “spirituality” and “vulnerabil-

ity.”

And he says that expressing both states of inner being through bodily movement is at the very core of it all.

“You have to be able to know who you are as a human being to perform his work, because it’s so honest,” he says. “And if

you don’t know who you are, then it’ll help you find out.”

So everyone wins.

At age 10, Gardner became a 100-percent convert to this credo after the Ailey troupe performed at his school. The result: He was further intoxicated by the performance of their

At a glance

What: Ailey II

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday

Where: Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts, 600 N. East St., Bloomington

Tickets: \$18.10 to \$28.50

Box office number: (866) 686-9541

Pre-concert event: Lecture on Ailey by Greg Merriman of the McLean County Dance Association, 6:45 p.m.

namesake’s trademark eclectic mesh of modern techniques.

“That could be me,” he now proposed to himself.

As a teen, Gardner’s dance interests intensified and became more focused on that long-cherished goal. He was rewarded with a chance to audition with the company and a subsequent scholarship to study with the Ailey troupe — provided he could relocate to New York City for his last year of high school.

Fate smiled down in the form of his godfather, who lives in New York and lessened his family’s concern about packing their 17-year-old son off to the big city to fend for himself.

One year later, here Gardner is: touring the country with his

heroes and perpetuating one of modern dance’s key legacies.

When Gardner was born, circa 1991, the troupe’s namesake had already been dead two years, having succumbed to AIDS in 1989. Ailey was only 58.

“But he left a lot of things in place and an incredible legacy — a wonderful school that artists come through, workshops, a wonderful director,” notes Sylvia Waters, the one-time Ailey dancer who has served as the company’s artistic director since.

“So there are still people there to perpetuate the spirit in which he did things,” she adds. “And people who didn’t know Alvin are touched by his vision as to what dance is and the part it plays in society.”

Gardner knows that he’s been touched, repeatedly.

“Oh, yes: his spirit is still around the building. As soon as you walk through the door, you feel it. And when we’re performing his work, he’s there with us, too.”

Describing that work, Waters says Ailey “was no elitist about dance; he was very much about people. His statements are very clear: He was interested in dance that really moved people and touched people, whether as a physical or musical or emotional statement.”

In the end, she says, “It was a human statement.”