



Unspoken grace

Alvin Ailey
American Dance
Theater' Rosalyn
Deshauteurs, center,
and members of
Sweet Honey in the
Rock performing "Go
in Grace," which
features a character
who is deaf.

PAUL KOLNIK

Ailey adds sign language to its motion repertoire

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Where: Prudential Hall,
New Jersey Performing Arts Center,
One Center Street, Newark

When: 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday;
3 p.m. Sunday

How much: \$23-\$92. Call (888) 466-5722
or visit njpac.org.

BY ROBERT JOHNSON
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater moves passionately and with a mission. The artists of this celebrated ensemble, which returns to the New Jersey Performing Arts Center this weekend, aim to reflect the human experience. The company makes a point of showcasing works by African-American choreographers, yet the repertoire, infused with spirituality, transcends definitions of race.

The current season marks the company's 50th anniversary, and for the occasion the troupe aims to leap across more barriers. Featured on Friday night and Sunday afternoon, for instance, will be "Go In Grace," a dance featuring a character who is deaf.

integrated into the choreography of this anniversary commission. The piece grew from a collaboration between emerging dance maker Hope Boykin and the renowned cappella singers Sweet Honey in the Rock, and is additionally signed for the hearing-impaired.

Sweet Honey will perform at these events — the final performances that "Go In Grace" receives on the Ailey company's national tour. With music and lyrics composed for the piece, "Go In Grace" tells the story of a family under stress. Surrounded by the singers, who offer harmonious support, the onstage community includes a worried father and mother, their rebellious son and his suspicious-acting friends and the deaf daughter who can't hear any of it.

"It's about the social environment that defines who we are as people," says dancer Tina Monica Williams, who performs the role of the mother. Speaking of her onstage daughter, Williams adds: "She's just as vulnerable as everybody else. She's just as strong as everybody else. Some people don't realize she is deaf. They just think she's Daddy's girl, and the boy is the one with all the issues. So this dance portrays a sense of normalcy that I don't think people always associate with being handicapped."

For Williams, who grew up in Elizabeth, dancing in "Go In Grace" has special res-

onance. Williams' parents are deaf, and she learned to sign at the same time she learned to speak. This is the first time Williams has been able to combine her knowledge of ASL with her dancing.

"There's a brief moment, where I dance and sign at the same time in the piece, and it's probably been one of the most satisfying moments in my life," says Williams, who helped to translate Sweet Honey's lyrics.

Although the meaning of an ASL gesture is more specific than most dance movements, these two avenues of non-verbal communication have something in common, Williams says. "Each sign has a facial expression and body language that goes with it that makes it very poignant. It's not like a written word, it has more resonance."

Shirley Childress Saxton, the sign-language interpreter for Sweet Honey, expounds upon this idea. "The interpreter is charged with conveying the total message: the feeling, the passion, the energy," Saxton says. "In a Sweet Honey song, you may have the sorrow of a blues song, or the rich texture of a gospel or spiritual. The interpreter is trying to convey the richness of that experience."

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American Sign Language has been