

Top-notch dance: coming to a smaller city near you

Ailey II is more than just a farm team for one of America's best-known dance companies

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SUSAN WALKER
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

"I was youngish," says Sylvia Waters of the time, in 1968, when she joined Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. "You can see that I'm trying not to be too specific," she jokes, speaking on a cell from a coffee shop in New York City.

But she's not shy about the number of years, 33, that she has led Ailey II, the Ailey young company that begins a tour in Ontario with a performance in Kingston's Grand Theatre.

The late Alvin Ailey, the man being celebrated in his company's 50th anniversary season, launched a repertory ensemble with a workshop for the best scholarship students from his company's school.

As it has evolved under Waters' direction, Ailey II is not just a farm team for the main company. Its six male and six female dancers bring shows performed in the unique Ailey style to towns all over North America that would otherwise see little if any live contemporary dance, let alone such an exuberant expression of African-American culture.

"A prodigiously talented woman, my steadfast friend and a most trusted confidante of Alvin and myself," is how the majestic AAADT artistic director Judith Jamison introduced Waters last month in New York. Honoring her colleague as a winner of a 2008 Dance Magazine Award, Jamison spoke of Waters' grace and passion as an interpreter of Ailey's choreography.

"I really started dance as a TV and movie dancer," Waters told her audience, "that is, in front of the TV." She took her first ballet steps in imitation of the ballerinas on the Sunday night *Ed Sullivan Show*.

A graduate of the Juilliard School, she danced with the New Dance Group and performed in Europe before joining Ailey's troupe, advised that "it would be a very important company one day."

Nurturing young dancers has become Waters' second career, rooted in her belief in the Ailey approach to dance as expression of soul. "It's our first language," she says. "Everyone dances."

Rachael McLaren, a long, lean dancer from Winnipeg, is one of those young talents nurtured in Ailey II. Jamison brought her into the main company last year.

McLaren started dancing in a small school at the age of 5. As a teenager she trained in the school of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. "Right after graduating from high school, I got a contract to perform in the Toronto production of *Mamma Mia!*," she said on a late afternoon before the Ailey company's City Center performance in New York.

There was some confusion, engendered by the success of *Mamma Mia!*: Was she destined to perform in musical theatre? Wondering whether to give dance another chance, McLaren enrolled in The Ailey School's summer program. She spent a year on an independent study production before Waters asked her to join Ailey II.

Like most members of the company, she danced in Ailey II for only a couple of years – long enough to know that this is what she wants to do. "I've definitely been very happy."

One of her partners at AAADT has been long-time featured dancer Glenn Allen Sims. "He's my man," she laughs. It has been a thrill for her to perform with people she looked up to as a student in the school.

Yannick Lebrun is another dancer McLaren sometimes partners. Lebrun also came out of Ailey II.

"Everybody is so supportive," says McLaren of the organization that is now her home. No wonder dancers refer to "the Ailey family."

Ailey II has also provided an opening for emerging choreographers. Besides performing the Ailey rep and works by established artists such as Lar Lubovitch and Jamison, the company has premiered shows by Robert Battle, Donald Byrd, Shapiro & Smith, Avila/Weeks and Kevin Wynn. A program might include Ailey's *Revelations*, alongside something like Christopher Huggins' very abstract *When Dawn Comes*.

The company does the work of inspiring young and ambitious dancers in the towns where they perform. Ailey II does residencies in universities and high schools wherever it goes, taking professional dance right into the community.



SUPPLIED PHOTO

Ailey II, the young company of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, a troupe of six male and six female dancers, is in the midst of a tour of smaller communities in Ontario.

Ailey II plays The Grand Theatre in Kingston, Jan. 21; the Rose Theatre in Brampton, Jan. 22; the Oakville Centre for the Arts, Jan. 23; and Brock University's Centre for the Arts in St. Catharines on Jan. 24. More information at alvinailey.org