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Renee Robinson glided into the spotlight as Alvin Ailey's 'woman with the umbrella'



CHRISTOPHER DUGGAN

Leaping out from a canopy

BY DENNEEN BROWN

The woman with the umbrella wades through blue ribbons of silk. Her hips roll like waves, mimicking the movement of water. Her body stretches, long and liquid, as if pulled by an invisible tension. The dancer twirls, and the parasol she holds spins, seemingly light as a feather, perfectly erect as if it were a flag announcing some triumph over sorrow.

The "woman with the umbrella" leaps and bends and flies in an ethereal dance synchronized to the old Negro spiritual "Wade in the Water." Under a soft blue light, others dance beside her, but it is the woman carrying the parasol who commands attention in this section of "Revelations," the signature work by the late choreographer Alvin Ailey.

The three-part piece was based on Ailey's memories of attending church in Texas during the Great Depression, when candidates for baptism would be led in processions to outdoor pools. It is among the



LOCAL LADY: Dancer Renee Robinson, above and top left (with Constance Stamatou and Matthew Rushing), grew up in Anacostia.

most popular and most performed works of modern dance, and millions of ballet fans around the world regard the woman with the umbrella with particular reverence.

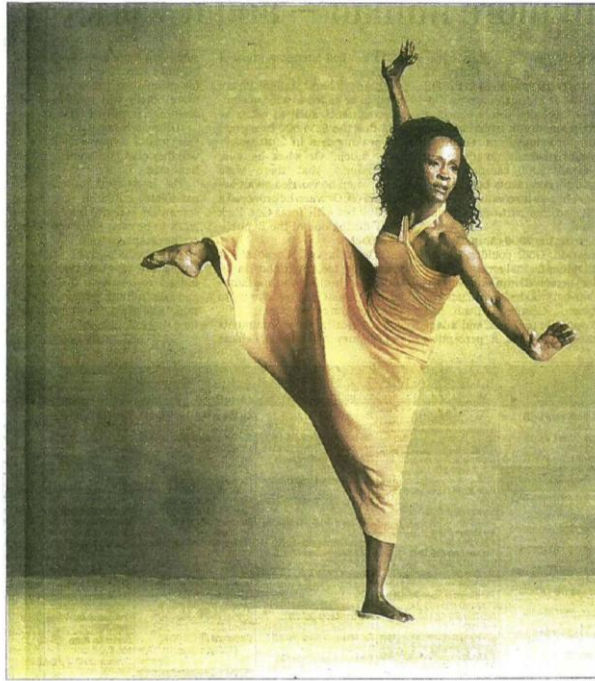
Renee Robinson.

Robinson grew up in Anacostia and started her training in classical ballet at the Jones-Haywood School in Northwest Washington. She joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1981, and Ailey chose her for the role of umbrella lady in 1989, shortly before he died.

"I remember when I was told I was going to do it; I was terribly excited and, of course, very nervous," she says. She was, after all, taking over a role once danced by the famed Judith Jamison, the principal dancer and star of the Ailey company who became its artistic director from 1989 to 2011. And Robinson knew how important the role was to Ailey.

Robinson can recall Ailey's story of seeing a

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IMPORTANT PART: Renee Robinson joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1981; eight years later, she was given the "woman with the umbrella" role in Ailey's signature work, "Revelations."

Ballet dancer's journey leads to 'Revelations'

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woman carrying a parasol as she led an outdoor processional. "The parasol was used to keep the sun off the person who was going to be baptized," Robinson recalls Ailey saying. "That significance is huge to me."

During early rehearsals, Robinson listened to Ailey's directions to the more seasoned dancers. "They were at a different point in the journey," Robinson says. "They could understand the specific details. I was not at that point yet."

But over the years, her insight into Ailey has deepened. "I understand what that means when I run out with the parasol, conveying the importance, the elegance, the reverence, the seriousness of the baptism. I would not have understood these things as a young dancer, because I had not had certain life experiences."

The troupe's associate artistic director, Masazumi Chaya, says it is rare for a dancer to become iconic for performing a role for two decades or more. "There are legendary names like Alicia Alonso in 'Giselle,' Margot Fonteyn in 'Sleeping Beauty' and former Ailey dancer Dudley Williams, who was known for 'I Wanna Be Ready' in 'Revelations,'" Chaya says. "Building this kind of legacy in a role takes a special artist who has great focus, creativity and love of

dance."

Robinson, who does not give her age, is the last remaining member of the company to be hired by Ailey. Although the role of umbrella lady takes much physical and emotional stamina, requiring great discipline in diet and exercise, she says she hasn't tired of performing it.

"On nights when it's your 10th city on tour, and you are feeling a little tired and get to the end of the evening . . . it's time to perform 'Revelations,'" she says. "When you hear the music and

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Renee Robinson, on being chosen for the role in 1989 by Alvin Ailey. The "woman with the umbrella" role had been danced by the famed Judith Jamison.

the ballet starts, you are energized. I never feel, 'Oh, "Revelations" again.' It's always a joy to perform it."

Part of that joy comes from the audience's reaction. She recalls the story of a family in Atlanta who arrived at the show late. "The father turned to the usher and asked, 'We didn't miss the umbrella woman did we?'" Robinson says.

"No," the usher replied, to the father's relief.

"It was wonderful for me to hear that story," Robinson says. "It was nice to hear it is a ballet that touches people."

After so many years, each movement in the dance has more significance to her, she says. The music means something deeper. She no longer has to think of each step. She feels it.

"All you have to do is make sure you do the ballet. Ms. Jamison would say, 'Trust the steps. Trust the story. If we do that, it will be correct. You don't have to add something.' It's there. It is beautifully there."

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ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

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