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Renee Robinson, of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, begins farewell performances

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By Lonnae O'Neal Parker

As a girl, Washington native Renee Robinson, one of the most storied members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for over three decades, remembers traveling all over the city. She'd leave her Anacostia home to attend high school at the all-girls Notre Dame Academy in NW. She'd do homework at the MLK library, or on the bus on her way at the legendary Jones-Haywood Dance School where she practiced almost every day of the week.

At the Kennedy Center Tuesday, Robinson will begin her Washington farewell performances—including as the iconic lady with the white parasol in Ailey's famed "Revelations"—in the city she says loved up on her, and filled her with support.

What was your first dance memory?

When I started at Jones Haywood, I was 10. I don't remember a big joyful moment. I had to focus really hard to do well. I enjoyed that it was a discipline that required exactness. Maybe because that was the type of school it was. The goal was to train young people to go on to become dancers.

What made you stay with dance?

That was a large part because of my mom. There are certain personalities in dance. We're hard on ourselves, and if you don't get everything right, the world will end. On those days when I wanted to quit because dance class didn't go well, I'd come trotting out to the car and my mother would be waiting for me. She would always say you can't quit because things aren't going well. If you don't like it, that's one thing, but you have to voice that to me on a day when you had a great class. I wasn't allowed to give up when I'd had a hard time. If I had a great day and came out and then said I wanted to try something else, okay. But not when it was hard.

How far did you think you'd go as a dancer?

I was toying with the idea of becoming an attorney. Growing up in D.C., it was politics and law, that's how my young eyes saw it. I was accepted into New York University. I was a dance major, economics minor. The idea was okay, I enjoyed dance, I could continue the dance experience at a higher level of education but it was definitely not in my thoughts that it would be a profession. The first year, you had to find something to do for summer break. I came to an Ailey audition and received a scholarship for the summer. I got into the Ailey school and my whole world changed. I was starting to learn other techniques besides just classical ballet. I was hooked. I learned more about Mr. Ailey and how much the company traveled. That's when the 'oh wow!' came in.

What kinds of encouragement did you receive from your community?

I would like to give a shout-out to Washington and the community—it was everybody's encouragement, the teachers at the school, the bus drivers who saw me get on that bus every Tuesday and Thursday. For the people who see young people doing good things or wonderful things, see them involved in something that is going to bring out the best in them, ultimately it brings out the best in everyone. Don't think those young people are not hearing you when words of encouragement are given, and continue to do it! To people in dance, sports, writing, part of the band lugging all those instruments, those words mean a lot. It was that kind of support. You hear people say when I was growing up, it didn't have to be just your school or parents who looked out for you, everybody did. They didn't have to be labeled as a mentor or counselor; it's just what you did. You looked out for young people.



Renee Robinson taking her final bows with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater after 31 years of dancing with the company. (Paul Kolnik - Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater)



Renee Robinson and other dancers perform as part of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. (Paul Kolnik - Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater)

How important are dance fundamentals, and have televised dance competitions helped or hurt attention to fundamentals?

When I'm speaking to young people...I try to speak about other professions and other disciplines where you have to learn fundamentals. Like a doctor, dancers go to school for the rest of their lives when they become professionals. They go to the audition, learn the routine, have to be able to perform it on the spot, bring their best body, be able to think on their feet and be able to show whoever is at the front of the room that they can fit into their vision. Singers come with something they know inside and out. Dancers only come with their bodies. So you have to come into that audition with a body that is tuned and ready.

How do you think it will feel to be doing farewell performances in your hometown?

I don't think I'll process that until I stop. Because of the excellence that the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is focused on bringing to audiences for around the world, that's what I've done for 30 years. My focus is what it has been for the last 30 years, being in class, making sure I'm ready to do what I love doing, and bringing the best to the stage.

Ailey's 21-city U.S. tour runs through May 19. Renee Robinson is scheduled to perform in D.C., Atlanta and Boston (the last stop on the tour).