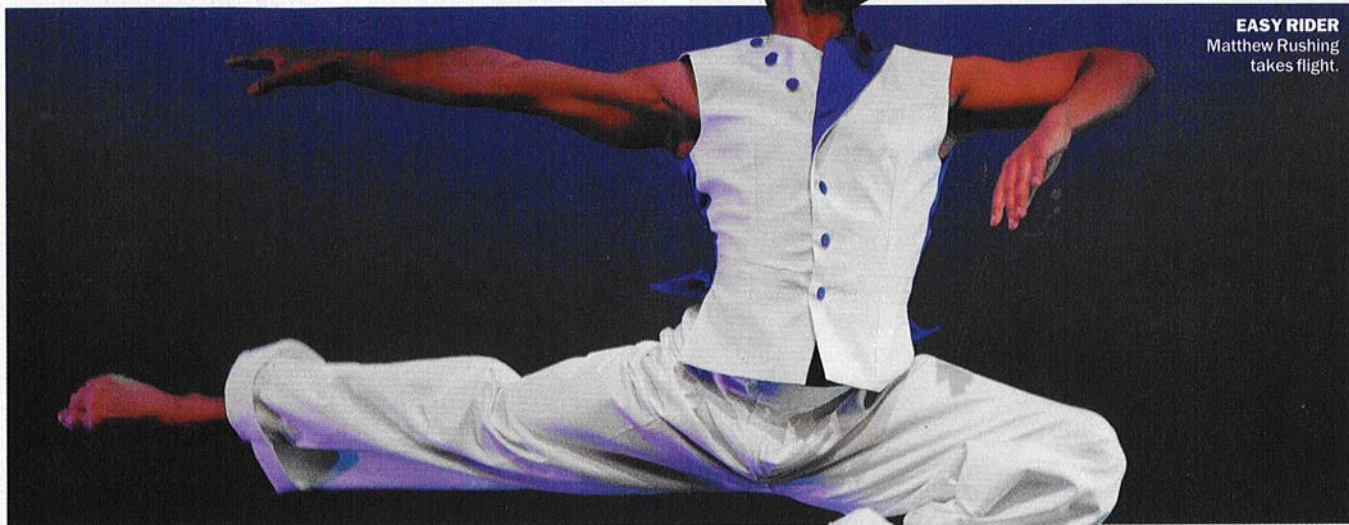


Dance



EASY RIDER
Matthew Rushing
takes flight.

Ronald K. Brown strips down

Dance

An enemy of artifice, the choreographer gives the Ailey company a shot at *Dancing Spirit*.
By Gia Kourlas

At a recent rehearsal for his new work at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the choreographer Ronald K. Brown didn't tell the dancers what they were doing wrong; he showed them, illustrating the silky, particular undulations of his movement by quietly slipping next to each one and dancing. Like magic, they fell into his rhythm, losing any residual toughness or mannerism along the way. "When I studied Swedish massage and shiatsu, my teacher said, 'That's the way you learn,'" Brown explained later, "so I just sort of transferred that over." In *Dancing Spirit*, he pays tribute to Judith Jamison in her 20th year as the company's artistic director. Featuring music by Duke Ellington, Wynton Marsalis, Radiohead (performed by the Vitamin String Quartet) and War, Brown's fourth dance for the company will do more than capture Jamison's larger-than-life verve. The year Jamison took over—1989—was the same year Ailey died. In *Dancing Spirit*, which opens on December 11, he celebrates them both.

You created this work in honor of Jamison—why?
It's to say thank you. I thought that a

woman would start the piece with basically everyone kind of following her. But once I put the first ideas on students this past summer, I realized that a man needed to start it—to represent Mr. Ailey bringing her to us. The images kept coming, so I had this idea to have Ms. Jamison dance with Mr. Ailey, and of bringing his spirit into the space and having people dance with him and kind of *be* him. The company's 50th anniversary film shows Mr. Ailey in "Sinner Man"—you know how he kind of charges toward the camera? [Laughs] What if I got the men and the women to do that? So they take Ms. Jamison and become Mr. Ailey. Then we could say thank you to both of them, because without him we wouldn't have her.

"Ms. Jamison is a giant. I needed something magnificent."

Would you take me through some of the music?

I knew I wanted to use two pieces from Wynton Marsalis, and then Radiohead has a song, "Everything in Its Right Place." I like the title, but the lyrics could be taken the wrong way, so I searched and found a few versions of the song; one, by the Vitamin String Quartet, was just so luscious. It's perfect for Ms. Jamison. Then I wanted something that really allowed them to

find the movement that would let them do that. Ms. Jamison is a giant. I needed something magnificent.

What performance quality are you after?

You can't have that performer gaze where you're not really looking at each other or that kind of generic longing in your face. I said, "We need the body and the face to be mobile, but connected to the intention. I know you think it takes a lot of energy, but it takes more energy to hold on." I also told them, "The habits that I'm talking about that you have? We can grieve for them, but we gotta kill them, at least for this piece." Matthew [Rushing] said, "When you come here, I feel like I get stripped down, and anything I could rely on I can't when I'm working with you."

Rushing is a dancer I sometimes love and in other times sense an artifice in. Do you understand?

There's something that [the dancers in his company] Evidence call smoky eyes, and I didn't know what it was. And they mention, "Oh, Matthew was great, but then he had the smoky eyes." So I think that might be what you're talking about. It's not squinting, but it's a way of focusing that's kind of put

on. I think that's a part of the performance thing.

Do you think it's encouraged?

I think in a lot of companies you're taught to look up in the balcony, right? It's far away. Look far into the distance!

It's that modern-dance corner that I hate so much.

That's what it is. If you're looking that far off into the distance that's the look that you have because you have to look like it's faraway, whereas I'm saying, "No. He's right there. Mr. Ailey is right there. We don't have to pretend."

Is this a different approach, even subtly different, from the other dances you've made for the company?

Yes. I thought I would be able to work more like how I work with my company, and I thought it would be because of the dancers. But I think it's probably more my comfort level. With *Grace* [Brown's first work for the Ailey company in 1999], I knew I had to give them something they could dance out because I didn't know if I could get them to understand how to dance the story. They could grab it. I feel like now I know more of how to teach the process. Even with the thing of is it going to read? Will Judi want them to look in the modern-dance corner? But I can't worry about that. I feel I just have to trust what I think it is.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is at New York City Center through Jan. 3.

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