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– Renee Robinson
(Photo by Andrew Eccles)

Dance icon ready to pass on life lessons

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With exposure comes gratitude

by *ChaVale Q. Conner*
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International star and celebrated dance icon Renee Robinson credits her nearly three decades of experience with the Alvin Ailey Theater Company for helping stretch her in myriad ways.

“I have been exposed to so much because of it. I have a wonderful plate of choices to pick from,” Robinson told the Tri-State Defender during a recent interview.

The world renowned Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will perform at The Orpheum Theatre March 19-March 21 courtesy of Rebecca Edwards and Cultural Arts For Everyone (CAFE.) Robinson will perform lead roles in Tony Award winner George Faison’s “Suite Otis,” which is set to the music of Otis Redding; Judith Jamison’s “Hymn;” and Ailey’s signature work, “Revelations.”

“I am very excited to be a part of this 20-city tour and I am so proud to be celebrating the work of our artistic director Ms. (Judith) Jamison and the jewel that Mr. Ailey left to the world,” said Robinson, who teaches master classes at the Ailey Theater Company.

The company’s performances at The Orpheum also will feature original musical scores by Nina Simone, Stevie Wonder, Duke Ellington and Robert Ruggeri. The dancers will perform seven revered classics, along with Ailey’s artistic masterpiece “Revelations,” which features a musical score set to African American gospel music or spirituals, and explores the deepest emotions of grief and joy inside the soul.

Robinson began formal dance training at the age of 10 at the Jones-Haywood School of Ballet in Washington D.C. Upon relocating to New York City in her late teens, she received two Ford Foundation scholarships to the School of American Ballet, and full scholarships to the Dance Theatre of Harlem School and the Ailey Theater.

Her stint with the Alvin Ailey Theater has taken her to some of the world’s most beautiful cities and allowed her to use movement to tell a range of stories set poetically to music. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has performed for an estimated 23 million people in 48 states and in 71 countries, including two historic residencies in South Africa.

Widely seen as international ambassadors of American culture, the Ailey dancers promote the uniqueness of the African-American cultural experience while advancing and enriching American modern dance.

Robinson, who said she still enjoys her association with the company, accepted her interviewer’s invitation to look ahead, and then offered this assessment of what might be in her future:

“I love to sketch and write and travel, so I see myself doing more than just one thing. I’ll probably be writing books for young dancers that answer many pressing questions they may have. I really want to make my work accessible to readers.

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One on one with Renee Robinson

ChaVale Q. Conner: Ms. Robinson, I am so honored to speak with you and I so admire your work. You have been called magnificent, fiercely calculated, and even said to be able to walk on air. Please tell me what was it like auditioning for the Ailey Company before you actually became a member?

Renee Robinson: Oh thank you. Well, I auditioned twice for the company and didn't get in the first time. I danced all the way in the back of the room behind the other dancers and Mr. Ailey assumed I didn't want to get into the company. I have always been very shy. I was determined to learn to handle my disposition, so the next time I auditioned, I danced in the front of the room, in full view of Mr. Ailey. Needless to say, I got into the company and history began.

CQC: What are your favorite parts of dancing and movement?"

RR: The physical part, absolutely, and the mental aspect of movement. Dancing is very mental and you must be and stay connected to your body. I doubt many people are aware of the intense concentration that it takes to dance and how much dancers use their minds to stay connected to their bodies.

CQC: Because you've been with the Ailey Company for almost three decades and have performed in front of numerous audiences, what attributes do you bring to your performances?"

RR: I try to bring a different delivery to each ballet. I never push the automatic button. I try to maintain and bring the same attention to detail to each performance; staying true to the shape and style and mood of each ballet keeps the performance fresh. Over time, I have learned to try to bring a richer perspective each time. I have grown to understand that the music and the "sitting" of each ballet has a message. It is my job to demonstrate that emotion as best I can.

(For tickets to the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater's performance in Memphis, call the Orpheum Theatre at 901-525-3000 or visit www.orpheum-memphis.com.)