

The Ailey: Healthy, Wealthy and Prized

By SARAH KAUFMAN
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The largest building in America devoted entirely to dance will open in midtown Manhattan in the fall, a steel and glass treasury of hard-to-come-by luxuries. Seventy-seven-thousand square feet. Eight floors housing 12 studios. Gobs of natural light, washing over custom-designed flooring. There will also be a black-box theater, costume shop and library. And plenty of hot showers.

The occupant? Not American Ballet Theatre (which rents space on lower Broadway). Not New York City Ballet (housed in smaller confines at Lincoln Center).

Stepping through the plate-glass doors at 55th Street and Ninth Avenue next November will be the 30 members of the Alvin Ailey American

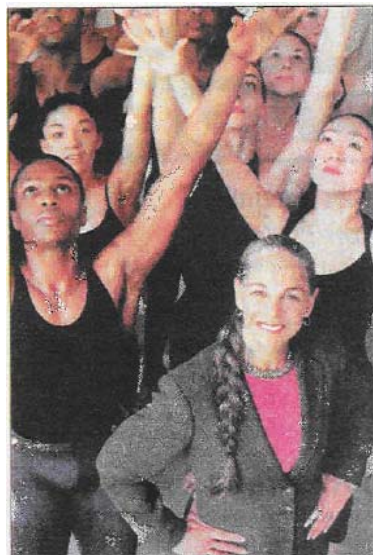
Dance Theater, a company that will have purchased the privilege with a remarkably stable financial situation. A financial situation, in fact, that is the envy of the dance world.

Look at the numbers: At a time when everyone in the arts is bemoaning the decline of corporate funding, Ailey just signed up financial services giant Morgan Stanley for a \$2 million sponsorship of its national tour. The first stop on that tour is the Kennedy Center Opera House, where on Tuesday Ailey opens a six-day engagement.

At a time when ticket sales since Sept. 11, 2001, have been dramatically in flux, year after year Ailey has busted box office records during its annual five-week season at the City Center here.

The company needed to raise \$54

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BY HELENE SEIDMAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST
Executive Director Sharon Gersten Luckman has brought the Alvin Ailey troupe hard-won stability.

AILEY, From N1

million for its new building, and it did. And then some. Millions more have poured in, allowing the troupe to seed an endowment. Its annual galas here typically bring in more than \$2 million, after expenses.

As recently as a dozen years ago, such riches were unimaginable for this troupe. It struggled for existence while founder Alvin Ailey was alive, and was on the brink of bankruptcy at the time of his death in 1989. Now, with a \$15 million budget, it is the world's largest and richest modern dance company. Ailey officials maintain that the organization tours more than any other performing arts entity on the planet, although it's not certain how they calculate this. Since Ailey dancers are on the road a total of 38 weeks a year, however, it's a difficult point to argue.

In a field with painfully short life cycles, Ailey is celebrating its 45th anniversary with enough financial muscle to suggest that it can keep its new building filled with dancers for some time to come.

How has it come this far?

The answer is threefold. First is the nature of the company's repertoire. Unlike most modern dance companies, which perform only the works of the choreographer who founded them, the Ailey company has always been a repertory ensemble.

But though the works are drawn from different sources, more and more they have come to share a few core characteristics: fast pacing, high energy and accessible music. The Washington programming attests to this. Among the classics, such as Ailey's "Night Creature" to music by Duke Ellington and a revival of Donald McKayle's "Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder," about life on a chain gang, on view will be three new works in a remarkably similar, punchy vein: Robert Battle's "Juba," Alonzo King's "Heart Song" and Dwight Rhoden's "Bounty Verses."

A fundamental draw is that most Ailey performances are anchored by the company's signature piece, "Revelations," the founder's eu-

phoric celebration of the African American experience that sets impassioned, bravura dancing to old-time spirituals and never fails to whip up a storm of cheers. It closes five of the seven programs at the Kennedy Center.

But the dancing isn't the only key. The company had "Revelations"—created in 1960—in its repertoire when it came close to the abyss in the early '90s. Arguably the most important reason for Ailey's success is that the company rings a number of bells for funders.

With residencies in various cities, school outreach programs and summer dance camps for underprivileged kids, Ailey has a focus on two areas—education and at-risk youth—that are currently hot, philanthropically speaking. Ailey has a stately and charismatic leader in Artistic Director Judith Jamison, a former star of the company who is an excellent spokeswoman and forceful lobbyist for her dancers. Her company's fiscal record indicates that it won't fold tomorrow, a chief consideration for corporations weighing where to bestow their charity dollars.

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ARTS

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Robust and Well Rooted, a Company With Reason to Strut



"Revelations," the Ailey's signature work that sets bravura dancing to old-time spirituals, is part of the troupe's program this week at the Kennedy Center.



2003 PHOTO BY PAUL MOLINA

The company raised \$54 million for its new building in Manhattan, which will open in the fall and is sure to become the envy of the dance world.



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And an Ailey performance is one of the few theatrical experiences where you will find black and white audience members together, applauding the efforts of a largely black cast.

Bluntly put, as both funding analysts and company officials say, Ailey is a well-respected minority organization with a lot of visibility that has kept its house in order.

That solid fiscal housekeeping is the third component of the company's success, a result of effective fundraising matched by good financial management. Financial management that, observers agree, is a model for the dance world.

"It's an incredibly appealing product," says Douglas C. Sonntag, director of dance at the National Endowment for the Arts. "Ailey is an admirable company that has capitalized on its artistic strengths to ensure its financial future." To do so, he says, the company has relied in equal measure on its artistic product, its staff and its "very committed board."

"To survive in this economic climate—or in any climate—you really have to have all three in place," Sonntag says. "This company is an exemplar of combining those three forces."

To be sure, the checks don't come in by themselves. By all accounts, Ailey has an unusually active board of trustees, five of whom have logged three decades of service each. Trustee donations account for about 40 percent of the nearly \$70 million raised through the capital campaign. Board chairwoman Joan H. Weill and her husband, Citigroup CEO Sanford I. Weill, have given \$18.5 million to the building fund, which explains the structure's name: the Joan Weill Center for Dance.

The center, designed by architects Carolyn Iu and Natan Bibliowicz, will house the entire Ailey organization: the professional company, the junior company, the dance school and the summer camp. It will be double the size of its current rented space.

And just as important as the money coming in is the way the money is managed, a task that falls to the company's soft-spoken but straight-shooting executive director, Sharon Gersten Luckman, known for her goal-oriented approach and success at streamlining the organization.

"I've got to give her all the credit for keeping the boat straight," said Jamison.

"She's like a laser beam—she gets to where she needs to go," said Kennedy Center President Michael Kaiser, who as Ailey's executive director from 1991 to 1993 hired Luckman as head of development.

Of course, key to any executive director's success is a productive partnership with the artistic head.

Asked her philosophy about how to build a good relationship with the money manager, Jamison is succinct. "Numberwise, I'm an artistic director," she says. "I don't want to hear anything about numbers. That's Sharon's job."

The company wasn't always in such good shape. When Kaiser arrived, the company was in debt and its budget was a third of its present size. He focused on fundraising and on increasing the company's visibility with free concerts in Central Park and a performance at President Clinton's first inaugural gala.

"We were raising only \$200,000 a year," Kaiser said, "including from our board members."

In some ways, however, the company was pulling in more funding then than now. Back in 1991, gov-

ernment funding accounted for three times as big a share of the budget as it does today. Foundation money was nearly double its present size. In the recently gloomy economy, Ailey has felt the same strains that have hurt the rest of the arts world. The company has survived, Luckman says, by finding new ways to make up the losses.

"If we didn't diversify our fundraising, we'd be in the same trouble as everybody else," she says.

Luckman has zeroed in on two sources: individual donors—who are targeted at the galas and through direct mail campaigns, for instance—and corporate sponsorships. Often a corporation can pay for a sponsorship out of its marketing department rather than its charitable giving branch, Luckman said, since the deal basically buys the corporation ad space on Ailey materials.

Luckman says her management strategies are simple. One is to keep costs down. That means staff size, salaries, touring expenses. The company tours with taped music. Sets and costumes are kept to a minimum.

"Relative to a ballet company, we're cheap to bring. But we can fill the house just as well, if not better," she says. "That's why we can tour so much. We can go into a city, set up and perform that night if we had to. . . . We're streamlined."

Additionally, a lot of effort goes into getting the derrieres into the seats. Luckman says she attends every performance in New York, on many nights bringing guests who she hopes will turn into funders.

"It's something our surveys tell us: If you get people in to Ailey once, they'll come back," she said.

How important to that formula is "Revelations," which Luckman likens to "The Nutcracker" in terms of popularity?

"If you're asking is 'Revelations' key to getting people in, there's no doubt about it," Luckman acknowledged. "When we do the numbers—and that's one reason we do so well, is we do the numbers—we do much better on the programs with 'Revelations' in terms of box office dollars."

Finally, Luckman said, she takes care of the sponsors. "Judith Jamison speaks to them, we arrange tickets, they're good seats. None of this 'Omgod, I left my clipboard at home.'" All of which has helped give Ailey status in the funding world.

"Performing arts groups are in the face of the public," said Curt Weeden, whose South Carolina-based Contributions Academy advises corporations on charitable giving. Supporting the high-profile Ailey company would be especially meaningful to a firm "trying to demonstrate an interest in diversity," Weeden said. "Alvin Ailey becomes a touring billboard for that organization."

This is exactly what attracted Morgan Stanley. According to Joan Steinberg, the firm's director of community affairs, the key to the deal was that Ailey matched "what we're trying to do philanthropically." She noted Ailey's educational programs for youngsters and the group's "inclusiveness."

"Clearly there's the benefit of having [the sponsorship] resonate our values to the community," Steinberg said. "If inclusion is important to us and it's important to Alvin Ailey, then this is a great way to express that." The sponsorship, she said, allows her firm "to portray our values in a visible way. . . . It makes the company look good."

A point that is not lost on Luckman. Speaking over dim sum before a performance a few weeks ago, Luckman described how the Ailey organization "is so relevant now with our funders. If funders

are interested in community-based work, if you're interested in multiculturalism, in bringing the races together—that's what we do. If you're interested in new choreography, we bring it around the world. If we're good at fundraising—and we are good—we should be able to get money from everybody.

"If you care about all the things I just said," Luckman continues, "your organization should be giving money to Ailey."