

At Home in the World

Ailey Moves On and Up

BY SUSAN REITER

The actual distance of the move is not far—six blocks south, one and a half blocks east—but as the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation takes up residence in its gleaming new eight-story home, what the move represents is momentous. In leaving behind a congested two-floor rental to enter its state-of-the-art permanent facility, the organization finally has a home that matches the breadth of its vision and the scope of its activities.

Sharon Gersten Luckman, Ailey's executive director since 1995, says the new building will help ensure that Ailey as an institution thrives for generations to come. It is also now the largest dance center in the U. S.

The cost of the 77,000-square-foot structure, which contains 12 climate-controlled studios, was \$54 million. A leadership gift of \$15 million from Joan and Sandy Weill (Joan is chairman of

but also through the range of the activities under the Ailey umbrella. The Ailey School, directed by Denise Jefferson, offers a wide variety of classes, including scholarship programs and the unique BFA program offered in conjunction with nearby Fordham University. The Summer Intensive culminates in exciting annual showings—until now, presented to capacity crowds on rows of folding chairs in steamy studios, but soon to benefit from the 285-seat black box space. “The school is bursting at the seams,” Luckman states matter-of-factly. “There are waiting lists for classes, and we were turning away people for the summer program. Now it will expand, and the additional studio space will give the school the luxury (which we didn't have) to offer more classes to the general public, classes that are not part of the professional training program.”

**'THOUGH IT IS MAINLY OUR HOME, WE ALSO ARE
PLANNING ON HAVING THE WHOLE DANCE COMMUNITY
USE THE SPACE' — SHARON GERSTEN LUCKMAN**

Ailey's Board of Trustees) got things moving; the new facilities are named The Joan Weill Center for Dance. A big boost came from the City of New York, which gave \$9.8 million. “One of the reasons the City was interested in helping us was that the project symbolized that this is the dance capital of the world,” Luckman observes. “Though it is mainly our home, we also are planning on having the whole dance community use the space—the black box theater, and the fabulous studios.”

What Luckman found particularly gratifying was that in addition to substantial donations from individuals and corporations, there was a positive response to a grassroots campaign. “We sent out mini-brochures to lists of people who attended Ailey. We've gotten so many gifts back, right away. These are people who never gave us money before, but this has touched something for lots of people. The most important part of Ailey is obviously what you see on the stage, but there are people who respond just to our mission of bringing people of all races together and to what we do for children.”

The organization reaches an unusually large and broad range of people not only because of the popularity of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's performances worldwide,

For the 12-member Ailey II, the “junior company” to which the school's top students aspire, and from which many dancers feed into the AAADT (as well as Philadanco, Dallas Black Dance Theatre, Elisa Monte Dance, LINES Contemporary Ballet, Complexions, and Broadway shows), the new home will mean an end to competing for space when both companies are rehearsing simultaneously. There will be plenty to go around. With a thermostat in each studio, carefully designed acoustics, and sprung floors with marley surfaces, the dancers will enjoy ideal working conditions.

Representing the fulfillment of a long-standing dream of Judith Jarnison's—and just in time to mark her 15th anniversary as artistic director—the new home was scheduled to be open for business in early November, so that everyone could settle in before the demands of the City Center season take over. Given the main company's busy and far-flung schedule—this year alone took them to Germany, Denmark, China, Singapore, and Hong Kong—the public dedication and festivities had to wait for a time when all members of the Ailey family could be together, and is now set for the beginning of March. See www.alvinailey.org. —SUSAN REITER