

# ENTERTAINMENT

SECTION E

## To dance, to dream

Glenn Allen Sims epitomizes Alvin Ailey mission

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Staff writer

AS REHEARSALS go, this one for a small group of invited guests has been a display of the usual excellence the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is known for.

Then, it happens. Renee Robinson, perhaps the leading lady among the company's bevy of leading ladies, throws her partner a look, lifts an eyebrow in challenge and tosses her shawl to the floor.

It's a choreographed game that's part of the "Backwater Blues" section in Ailey's "Blues Suite." But there's an extra glint of mischief happening here.

And staring right back at Robinson is her frequent partner, Glenn Allen Sims.

They both look down at the shawl, then back at each other. "Well, pick it up," her look says. His look answers, "Oh, so it's gonna be like that, Miss Thing?" Sims picks up the shawl, but you know this little bit of gamesmanship isn't over.

Minutes later, Sims makes his own statement when he suddenly adds an extra couple of fast twirls while turning Robinson in the air.

Robinson and some of the guests, familiar with the piece, gasp a bit in surprise. Artistic director Judith Jamison chuckles. Sims just shrugs.

It's exactly the sort of audaciousness Ailey himself might have smiled at.

"For Alvin, dancing was never just about steps. It was about spirit, about telling stories, and it was about dancers who could bring something more to the dance than just steps," Jamison says.

This month, Jamison leads a massive celebration of Ailey's legacy. The company is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year with a series of special events, including many surrounding this month's annual season at New York's City Center Theater.

The City Center season opened recently with a gala hosted by Oprah Winfrey. Highlights include a week of performances celebrating the music of Duke Ellington with Wynton Marsalis and his Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra.

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"Things just clicked for me."

— Alvin Ailey dancer Glenn Allen Sims, of Long Branch.



Photos by BRADLEY J. PENNER  
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### ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

50th anniversary celebration ■ Through Jan. 4 ■ City Center Theater, West 55th Street between Sixth and Seventh avenues, New York City ■ Call (212) 581-1212 or visit [www.citycenter.org](http://www.citycenter.org)

ON THE WEB: Visit our Web site, [www.app.com](http://www.app.com) for a photo gallery of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Glenn Allen Sims.

# Ailey

FROM PAGE E1

A new work will feature live accompaniment by the renowned group Sweet Honey In The Rock.

"Alvin believed in reciprocity. There was no moment that was not designed to come across the footlights," says Jamison, who was one of the company's most iconic dancers before she assumed the helm after Ailey's death. "The dancers are the ones keeping Alvin's dream alive. They connect with people; they make the dance real for people."

## 'Shore' of himself

For 11 years now, Glenn Allen Sims has epitomized the Ailey mission.

The Long Branch native has shown himself more than able technically to hold his own and then some in legendary pieces.

"When I first came into the company, it just came out of me. I happened to have an old spirit, so to speak, and things just clicked for me," says the 33-year-old dancer. "Those first weeks, months, the first year, it was like being thrown into the deep end and finding yourself in the middle of all of this wonderful history and legends and amazing works."

That Sims was able to handle the technical end of things isn't so surprising. After a few years of dabbling in jazz and tap, he devoted himself, as a high school student, to serious training at Red Bank's Academy of Dance Arts. He was a third year student at the prestigious Juilliard School when he joined the Ailey company.

But it is Sims' charisma and growing sense of artistry (along with a deft talent for partnering) that has catapulted him to principal status opposite established star dancers like Robinson.

Says Jamison: "Glenn is like a prince. He looks like a football player, but he carries himself like he's ascended to a throne and he's very prince-like." She adds that some Ailey board members call him, "the quarterback."

Of course that football player comparison is relative. Sims body is definitely not oversized and he is far from being the tallest man in the company. But there is a muscular-ness to his physique that has become more chiseled over the years.

"I was really round," Sims says flatly, with a typical dancer's disparagement of his body.

But the kid from Long Branch had a certain something.

Jennifer Church, who taught Sims at the Academy in Red Bank, says even as a teenager, Sims had an impressive sense of discipline and raw talent — a powerful combination.

"I remember when he came to audition for a scholarship with us, it was a ballet scholarship and he was a jazz and tap dancer," Church recalls. "But he

just had this charisma. There was just something about him. I just knew I wanted to train him.

"And he took it very seriously. He really wanted to work; he took 20 hours a week his first year with us. He really knuckled down; the commitment was always there."

Not that Sims wasn't a regular kid.

"I remember the boardwalk and all the amusements and arcades that were once such an attraction for Long Branch," Sims recalls. "There was Kids World, the waterpark, the haunted mansion — which I never went into."

"But most importantly there was just riding my bike to friends' houses and along the shore. That was the best."

Sims says he tries to visit about twice a year when he has time off from the company to talk to the kids. He also teaches the occasional class at the Asbury Park Dance Academy.

When the news came that Sims had been accepted into the Ailey company, Church says she wasn't surprised at all.

"It was just a tears in the eyes moment," Church says. "And seeing him on-stage is just a thrill."

Once in the Ailey company, Sims revealed another important talent; he had a gift for, as Jamison put it, "stretching movement." And, he proved to be an excellent partner, a skill Sims has always credited to his training at the Academy.

"He could probably lift me and make me feel secure," says Jamison, who is almost 6 foot tall. "He's extremely strong and very powerful when he's on the stage."

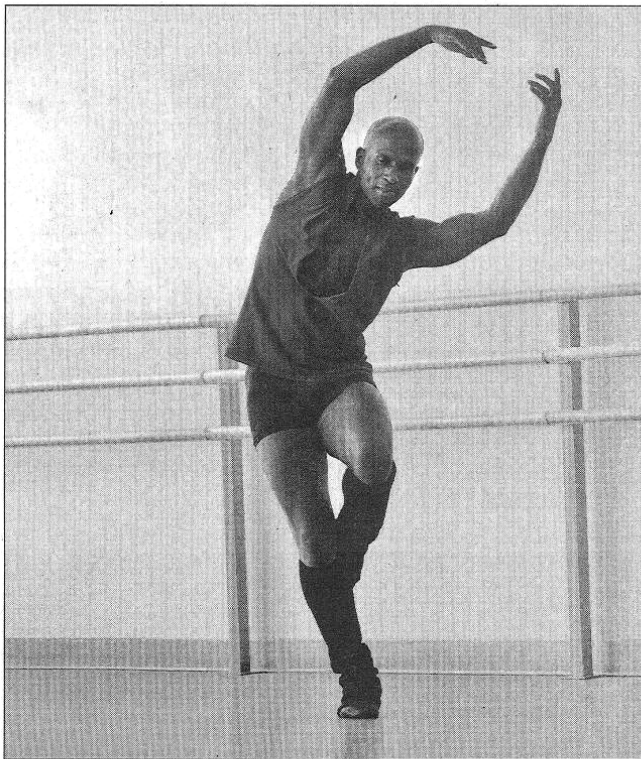
Then Jamison pays Sims the ultimate compliment when she adds, "And Glenn can almost do all the lifts in 'Backwater Blues' that Mr. Ailey did when he performed it and that's saying something. And Glenn does them effortlessly. He just has a presence."

## An affirmation

As Sims, Robinson and the other Ailey dancers have their annual, month-long season at New York's City Center, there will be even more of an emphasis on doing things "like Alvin." Sims sees the anniversary season as both a celebration and an affirmation of the company and its founder.

"How many African American choreographers have a company that lasts so long? How many dance companies last this long period?" Sims says. "People who don't see any other dance companies come to see the Ailey company. It's really incredible what's happening here when you think about it."

Ailey died in 1989; many companies fold once a founder dies. But while the company went through a period of financial uncertainty, it has, in the last 10 years especially, grown to be one of the world's largest and most financially



Alvin Ailey dancer Glenn Allen Sims' charisma and sense of artistry has catapulted him to principal status. BRADLEY J. PENNER/Staff Photographer

stable arts organizations. in the world.

Savvy marketing has also helped the company maintain its populist appeal. Indeed, members of the company have performed on television shows such as "Dancing With the Stars" and "So You Think You Can Dance."

Sims is featured in a newly published children's book on dancers, "Meet The Dancers: From Ballet, Broadway, and Beyond," by Amy Nathan.

As for the repertoire, the company has always performed some of the 75 works Ailey created, but the company has also always been a repertory company, embracing early classics, especially those by black choreographers, and helping to foster the careers of newer choreographers such as Ulysses Dove, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Ron K. Brown.

"It's really amazing being here at this time. I mean way back in 1989, when Mr. Ailey passed, I was just a boy watching the news, not really knowing who he was," Sims says.

Alvin Ailey is now recognized as one of the most important figures in performing arts. His company became a beacon, not only for its deliberately multicultural group of dancers, but for the works Ailey

created for his dancers, especially those that celebrated aspects of black culture, such as traditional spirituals with his most famous piece, "Revelations."

"Alvin was a forward thinker, a person who understood the human condition. That's what has continued to resonate with people after all these years," says Jamison, who was one of the company's most iconic stars before assuming the helm after Ailey's death. "He loved dancers and he loved people and celebrating our experience as African Americans. He loved to celebrate modern dance in the United States."

"And he loved the sense of extending those traditions and extending that whole sense of joy in the dance to everyone."

More than most companies of its size and stature, the Ailey company makes a point of getting into communities. The Ailey school offers a vast assortment of "open" classes in addition to more specialized pre-professional classes. Ailey summer camps and summer intensives are offered across the country.

And for this 50th anniversary season, the Ailey organization's schedule has included an afternoon of free performances and classes along with a street fair at City Center, and a

special night this month where tickets were sold for just under \$20. Fans can also expect to see a series of Hallmark greeting cards, a 2009 calendar and a special Barbie doll dressed like Jamison in a costume from "Revelations."

## Amazing experiences

For Sims and the other dancers, the anniversary has brought its own fascinating challenge: learning dozens of Ailey works that have been brought out of mothballs, polishing up ones already in the repertoire, and learning new works like one that will incorporate singers from the a cappella group Sweet Honey In The Rock.

"It's been an amazing experience just learning these works. Every day (of rehearsals) is another surprise, works you only heard stories about or saw pictures of and now we're learning them," Sims says. "Just when you think you know him, you learn another piece and you see another side. I feel fortunate that I'm here at this time to be able to go through learning all these works they're pulling out for us to do."

Sims says he had only a slight awareness of Ailey and the company growing up. But just before his senior year in high school, he

found himself, at the suggestion of a guest modern teacher at the Red Bank Academy, taking summer classes at Ailey.

"It all sort of clicked for me that summer at Ailey," he recalls. He was in a place where he was no longer the only guy or the only black person in class.

"It was an awakening for me. I knew that African Americans danced, but I wasn't used to seeing them in that light, on that level," Sims says. "Where I grew up, you usually saw black guys playing football or basketball."

And yes, he knew about black dance companies. But the dancers didn't seem to have rounded bodies like his.

"Then I got to Ailey and there were these pictures of the man and he was a big guy. He had a man's body. But he was a dancer," Sims says.

Seeing the company perform live, then having a chance every day to talk to company members as they took their lunch breaks in the hallway, inspired Sims.

## Always learning

Sims, who is married to Ailey dancer Linda Celeste Sims, says he thinks back to that summer whenever he encounters kids at the Ailey school now.

"I was so inspired. By the end of that summer, I was very motivated. I knew what I wanted. I knew there was a place for me," Sims says.

Now, the 50th anniversary season at City Center is teaching him even more about Ailey, Sims says.

"You're really getting a grand spectrum of his choreography. I mean I knew he had all the sides to him. But you're really getting to see how much more there was to him," Sims says. "It's like we, as the dancers, are getting this gift, with these works. And at the same time we're sharing his gift with everybody else."

And sharing the Ailey magic means that Sims is something of an ambassador.

"He tries to come down here about twice a year when he has time off from the company to talk to the kids. It's wonderful that he hasn't forgotten his roots here at home," Church says.

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