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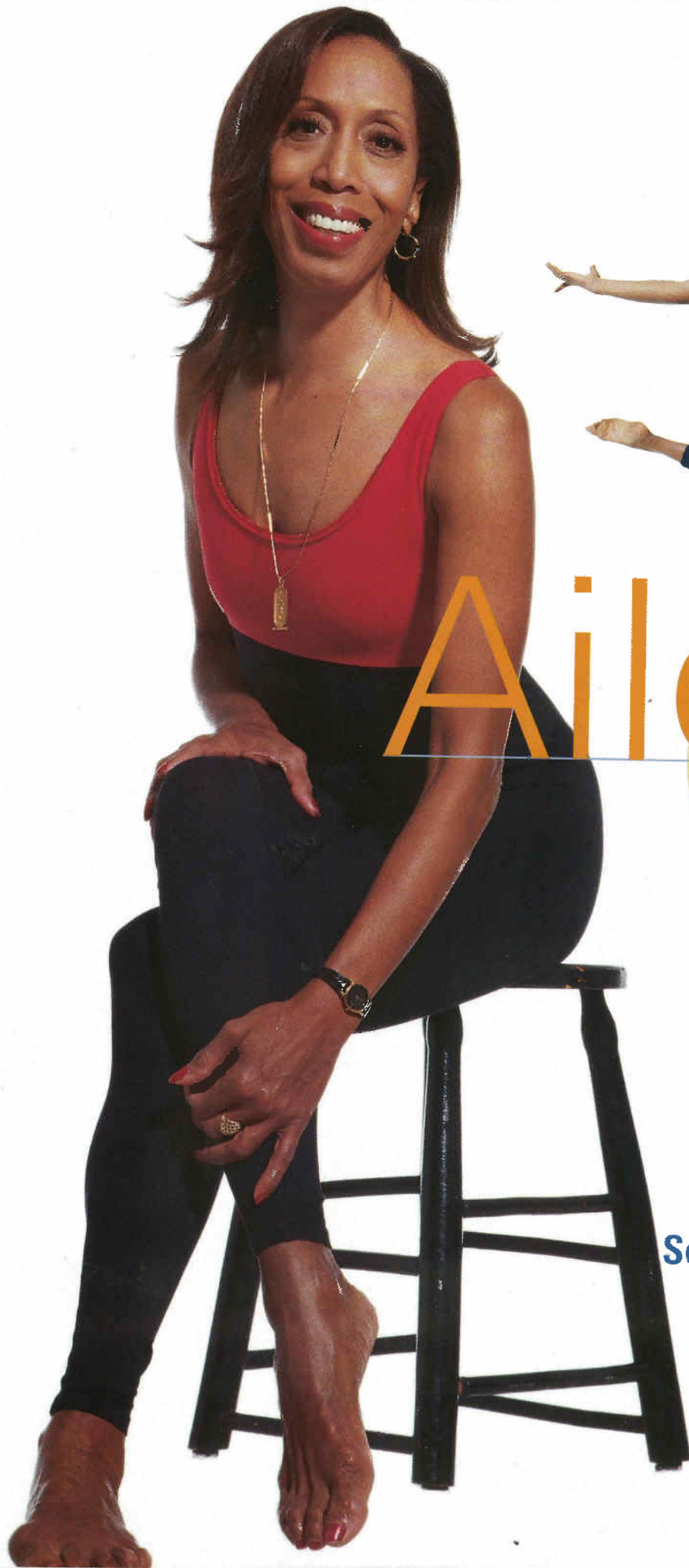
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DENISE JEFFERSON

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Ailey's

Innovator and artist

Denise Jefferson

is leading The Ailey

School to the forefront of

dance education with

wisdom and grace.

"Ready, dancers," says Denise Jefferson in a soothing voice, prompting the 9 am modern class at The Ailey School to begin a series of floor exercises. As the 17 students contract and elongate their muscular bodies to the steady beat of a drum, Jefferson circles the room gracefully: chin lifted, hands on her hips and eyes focused intently on the dancers. Dressed in a pale bluish-green leotard and a navy blue knit jumpsuit folded at the waist, Jefferson's lean yet sculpted figure resembles those of students less than half her age.



DENISE JEFFERSON WITH AILEY/FORDHAM BFA STUDENTS

Grand Dame of Dance

by Susan Amoruso

Though her physique seemingly hasn't changed with the years, Jefferson's teaching style has. "When I was younger, I would scream and yell more—not necessarily negatively—but I was more personal and high-energy," she says. "As I've gotten older, I've started believing in creating an artist by creating a safe environment. You don't have to intimidate—that's old school. You support the students."

It is as the director of The Ailey School that "Ms. J" guides the approximately 4,000 students who attend classes annually. The legendary Alvin Ailey himself selected Jefferson for the esteemed position in 1984.

In collaboration with Judith Jamison, the artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and The Ailey School, Jefferson perpetuates Ailey's mission to make dance accessible to all.

Yet, with wisdom and sophistication Jefferson has exceeded this original goal. Though Jefferson is most recently regarded for breaking new ground with the development of the Ailey/Fordham BFA program, for the past 18 years she has helped establish the foundation for the school's preeminence.

A diverse course curriculum, including Horton- and Graham-based techniques,

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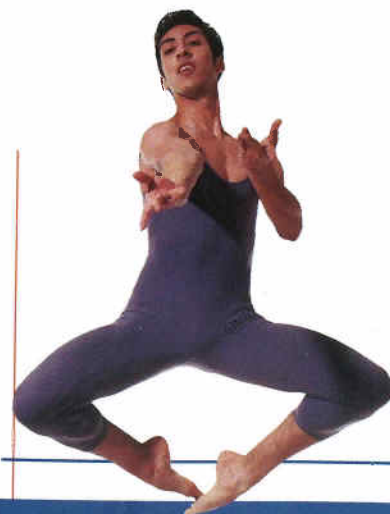


ballet, jazz and Western African dance, allows students to become well-rounded dancers capable of performing AAADT repertory, in ballet or modern dance companies or on Broadway. In keeping with Ailey's belief that dance instruction should be for everyone, students can also choose from a range of training levels, including First Steps (ages 3-6); the Junior Division (ages 3-17); the Fellowship Program (ages 15-21); the Ailey/Fordham BFA in Dance; and open-to-the-public classes.

Respect for the educational process, however, is non-negotiable. Pre-professional students must abide by dress codes and rules, respect the faculty and attend classes regularly. "I believe very much in rules and traditions," says Jefferson. If a student is acting out, Jefferson persists in discovering the root of the problem. On staff is a mix of female and male faculty advisors as well as a psychologist and a nutritionist. "I don't want to just tell kids to lose weight," says Jefferson. "It's about giving them tools so they can make informed, good judgments, not beating your own ideas into their heads."

Whether students feed into the renowned AAADT or its second company, Alvin Ailey II, join professional dance troupes in the United States and abroad or just become fervent supporters of the arts, they leave the school with invaluable tools for the future. "Through the arts your own voice is validated, your uniqueness is appreciated, your communication skills are developed, you learn discipline, time management and a respect for authority—all wonderful things that can go beyond dancing," says Jefferson.

Though she directs a school associated with one of the leading NYC modern dance troupes, Jefferson grew up in Chicago training for a career in ballet with a strict teacher named Edna L. McRae. "It

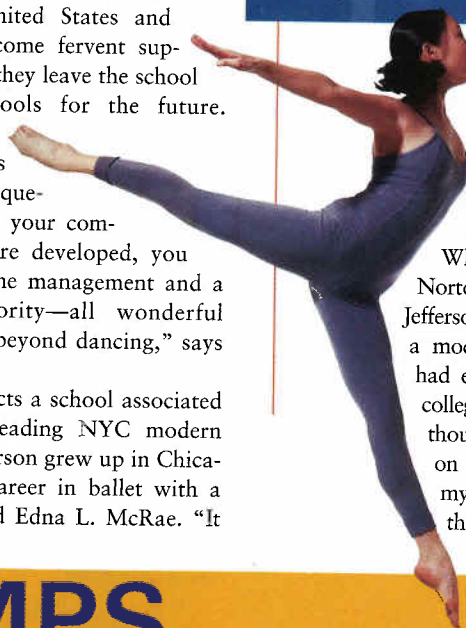


THE AILEY SCHOOL

211 West 61st Street
3rd Floor
New York, NY 10023
212-767-0590
www.alvinailey.org

DATE FOUNDED: 1969

PROGRAM DESCRIPTIONS: First Steps (ages 3-6); Junior Division (ages 3-17); Fellowship Program (ages 15-21); Certificate and Independent Study Programs (ages 17 and up); Summer Intensive Program (professional division: ages 16-25; junior division: ages 12-15)



didn't really touch my heart," says Jefferson of ballet. "I liked moving, but I didn't really enjoy pointe work." It was as an undergraduate at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, that Jefferson was first exposed to a modern class, which she had enrolled in to fulfill a college gym requirement: "I thought, 'Why am I sitting on the floor? Where are my pink tights? What is this improv?'"

AILEY CAMPS

Started in Kansas City, Missouri, in the late 1980s, AileyCamps are full-day, six-week summer scholarship camps designed to give at-risk youth tools with which to change their lives. Students age 11 to 14 participate in dance classes as well as personal development workshops, creative writing classes and field trips. "The idea is not that we will necessarily train tomorrow's professional dancers, but that we will help young people become stronger and better," says Jefferson. Yet, it's not unheard of for talent to be discovered at these camps: Ailey II member Terrence A. Poplar was one of its original participants.

Currently, there are AileyCamps in Kansas City, MO; Chicago, IL; Bridgeport, CT; Boston, MA; Kansas City, KS; Berkeley, CA; and New York, NY, where the camp is co-sponsored by The Children's Aid Society.

In 2004 Alvin Ailey American Dance Center is moving from its current rental location on West 61st Street to a state-of-the-art building on West 58th Street. "[The move] is going to be phenomenal," says Denise Jefferson. "We'll have a studio theater with lights and wings and 12 studios so that we don't have to cut back classes when the company is here."

Her resistance toward modern dance diminished when she took a class with dancer and choreographer Donald McKayle at the New England Conservatory in Boston. "The power, the passion, the classicism and the intelligence behind [modern technique] excited me tremendously," she says.

After receiving a BA in French at Wheaton, Jefferson decided to pursue a career in dance. She traveled to New York City and began taking classes at the Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance, and four months later, received a scholarship. Two years later, Jefferson was discovered in class by former Graham dancer Pearl Lang and asked to join the Pearl Lang Dance Company. Meanwhile she was earning an MA in French at New York University. In 1969, her daughter Francesca Harper was born—the first among the many professional dancers that Jefferson would later create. (Harper, a former member of the Frankfurt Ballet, is currently on tour with *Fosse* and has been recently commissioned by Jamison to create a new work for AAADT.)

A severe knee injury turned Jefferson's focus from performing to teaching. She fell in love slowly with her new occupation. "I would see my friends dancing, or a piece that I really wanted to do, and it was kind of painful," she says. "It took about a year for me to get past that longing." Jefferson started teaching at New York University as well as at The Ailey School, where she joined the faculty in 1974. "My teaching really accelerated," she says. "I was given more

classes because the students were enthusiastic and I was getting results from them."

Jefferson's next career shift—from educator to director of The Ailey School—yet again proved successful.

Noticing more high school students opting to go on to college dance programs instead of moving into professional companies, Jefferson, along with the program's co-director Edward Bristow, created the Ailey/Fordham BFA in Dance in 1998. The four-year, full-time program enables students to develop as both artists and academics through the completion of 140 credits in a balance of dance and liberal arts courses.

This year, the first class of the Ailey/Fordham BFA program will graduate. "Our students have really been able to eat at this academic feast at Fordham," says Jefferson. "Dancers are fabulous students. They are some of the most committed, disciplined, focused people, with good time management and critical and analytical skills." Currently Jefferson is assisting two students in the program with a proposal to Fordham for a dual degree—a BA and a BFA. She is also looking to develop an MFA program with a concentration in performance and pedagogy in the future.

Jefferson's eclectic background prepares her for the many situations that arise at The Ailey School. Fully aware of the benefits of a well-rounded education, she is able to help BFA students bridge the gap between academics and the arts. Sharing the discoveries of her own life's path enables Jefferson to guide students into their own bright futures. **DT**

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