

October 19, 2014

Ailey offers ode to Odetta

Kansas City will see a preview of the dance company's tribute to the singer, activist.

By LISA JO SAGOLLA
Special to The Star

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is marking this year's 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act with Matthew Rushing's "Odetta," a new piece honoring folksinger and civil rights activist Odetta Holmes.

The piece will make its official premiere in New York in December, but "Odetta" will preview Friday in Kansas City at the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts. Beginning Wednesday, the troupe will present five mixed-repertory performances there.

A former dancer and now the company's rehearsal director, Rushing is particularly pleased that "Odetta" is previewing in the city he considers the birthplace of his Ailey career.

Rushing's inaugural appearance with the organization was as a performer in Ailey II on a tour that began at the Folly Theater.

One of the most revered dance companies in the world, New York-based Alvin Ailey dance company considers Kansas City its second home because of the unusual support it receives from Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey.

Founded in 1984 to present Ailey performances and further African-American choreographer Alvin Ailey's mission to make dance education accessible to all youngsters, Friends of Alvin Ailey is celebrating its 30th anniversary.

The conjunction of the two anniversary celebrations is a reminder that promoting racial equality, integration and education through dance is at the heart of all things Ailey.

"What we've done for 30 years is something I don't see in other organizations," said Tyrone Aiken, executive director of Friends of Alvin Ailey. "And that's the forming of minority-majority partnerships. We're trying to develop the tools to bring people together, to have ongoing conversations about how you develop institutions that look like the community they're in. That's one of the things we're committed to, and we want other organizations to take up that mantle with us."

Aiken is especially excited about one of the older works the company will perform this week, "Memoria." Choreographed by Ailey in 1979 upon the untimely death of his friend and longtime colleague Joyce Trisler, the piece will incorporate 24 dancers from the UMKC



PAUL KOLNIK

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will give five mixed-repertory performances at the Kauffman Center, including a preview of a new piece.

ONSTAGE

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs Wednesday through Saturday at the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts. Tickets are \$29-\$99 through kauffmancenter.org.

Conservatory of Music and Dance. To commemorate Trisler's work as a performer, choreographer and teacher, Ailey designed "Memoria" for a cast that assembled dancers from his main company and from Ailey II, along with students from his school.

"He was using the students to illustrate the long-lasting influence Trisler had on the dance community," said Alvin Ailey former rehearsal director Ronni Favors, who is teaching the choreography to the UMKC students.

Trisler taught at the Ailey school and "was instrumental in raising a whole generation of dancers in the 1970s," Favors said. "She provided in-class training, as well as behind-the-scenes coaching. I remember getting phone calls from her late at night with suggestions and encouragement. She spared no effort in nurturing dancers."

When casting UMKC students, Favors looked for those she thought embodied the qualities of an Ailey dancer.

"The fundamental thing about the Ailey company that has kept people coming back year after year is what they feel in their hearts when they see the dancers onstage: the excitement, the warmth, the generosity. I chose students who could imbue their dancing with those feelings."

When Aiken was a scholarship student at the Ailey school in New York City, he was selected to perform in "Memoria." This week's per-

formances bring him a sense of having come full circle.

"Dance came from the people and should be delivered back to the people," Aiken remembers Ailey saying frequently.

While the Ailey organizations' monumental educational outreach efforts certainly manifest that belief, a motivation to educate also permeates the company's performance work.

The idea to make a ballet about Odetta, who died in 2008, came to artistic director Robert Battle when he attended her memorial service with a friend who had produced a Christmas album for her.

"I was struck when one of my heroes, Maya Angelou, came out and spoke about Odetta, about her courage, her strength," Battle said. "I thought more people need to know her story, how she used her voice as a weapon for change."

Though that realization occurred to Battle long before he sat at the helm of the Ailey company, it resurfaced when he saw "Uptown," a 2010 piece Rushing choreographed.

"The research Matthew did and the way he told the narrative without being heavy-handed made me realize he was the perfect person to delve into the life of Odetta and tell her story in a unique way. Matthew's a great teacher. And I don't think that's completely separate from choreographing. I know some choreographers would argue differently. But I think that embedded in

this form of creativity is a great teacher."

At an "Odetta" rehearsal about a week into the creation of the piece, I was spellbound by Rushing's expressive choreography and the work's powerful score of Odetta recordings and interview excerpts. The abundance of the emotional, musical and political information conveyed is terrifically stimulating.

"She was a folksinger, but she also sang musical theater, jazz, blues and even prison songs," Rushing said. "So I felt I couldn't use just one dance discipline to interpret such a versatile voice." His choreography melds West African, Afro-Cuban, samba, jazz, contemporary ballet and modern dance vocabulary.

"Choreography does not come easy for me," he said. "I have more fun putting together the music, working on the costume design, talking about lights, thinking about ways to use the set."

"When I get in the studio I feel pressure about the responsibility I have, so I can't say choreography is my first passion. But the more I do it, the more I'm finding out why I do it — and it's to educate."

Rushing created "Uptown" after discovering a wealth of information.

"When Robert approached me about Odetta, it was an identical situation. Once I learned who she was, how skilled she was in her art form, what a humanitarian she was, I knew I had to share it. And choreography was a way I could do that."

