

Francesca Harper named artistic director of Ailey II

By: Zita Allen

September 30, 2021



Ask Francesca Harper how she felt when Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Artistic Director Robert Battle announced her appointment as artistic director of Ailey II, that internationally renowned AAADT's acclaimed troupe of young talented dancers and she gushes with excitement declaring, "It's kind of surreal." Yet, in many ways the appointment seems a natural step in a rather remarkable career, as well as a promising beginning of a critically acclaimed dance company's next chapter, and last but not least, as a perfect example of the circle of life.

Harper's appointment opens the next chapter of Ailey II as it prepares for a much-anticipated return to live performances with the kickoff of its 2021-2022 season, beginning in December with participation in the AAADT's annual New York City Center season. The Ailey II dancers will join the AAADT for the performance of Ailey's classic "Memoria," the tribute to Ailey colleague, dancer and master teacher Joyce Trisler. Then without skipping a beat Ailey II kicks off a busy 2022 with its own New York season March 23-April 3 at the Ailey Citigroup Theater along with a U.S. Tour. (THE TOUR IS BEFORE AND AFTER THE U.S. SEASON)

During a recent interview, Harper's enthusiasm clearly communicated the energy of an artist ready to hit the ground running a quality the AAADT search committee must have found compelling after what AAADT Artistic Director Robert Battle said was, "an exhaustive international search done by a firm. We wanted to make sure we had a wide variety of people who we may not have thought of. There were so many great candidates but at the end of the day, we made the right choice for the right time. She came equipped."

In fact, so many aspects of Harper's biography makes this appointment feel like a homecoming. In fact, Battle mentioned that the multi-talented Harper not only trained at the Ailey School before embarking on an extraordinarily successful professional career in dance, but regularly returned to teach and choreograph. What's more, in addition to being "charismatic, caring and utterly brilliant," Battle noted, "She knew Mr. Ailey and drew inspiration as a dancer from Ms. Jamison. And her vision for Ailey II will not only bring fresh perspectives to Mr. Ailey's legacy, but also bring new voices to the stage and propel the Company forward. She is the perfect choice to lead Ailey II."

Ailey II is an artistically important part of the Ailey vision, says former Ailey dancer Sylvia Waters who served as that company's first artistic director for 38 years after Mr. Ailey entrusted her with this smaller troupe designed to serve, among other things, as "a performance vehicle for the gifted and talented dancers of the Ailey School to teach them what it was to be in a company." It's done such a successful job of training future dancers that many Ailey II dancers have gone on to join the main company, AAADT, and many choreographers whose works were presented by the second company have gone on to create dances on the first company.

Battle's excitement about the choice of Francesca Harper to head this important artistic entity is underscored by a resume that he and Bennett Rink, executive director of the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, found impressive to say the least. The multi-talented, multi-discipline Harper has had an impressive career as a dancer, choreographer, singer, actor, director, producer and teacher both in America and in Europe. She grew up surrounded by dance greats studying at the Ailey School, becoming a soloist with the Dance Theatre of Harlem under the direction of Arthur Mitchell, choreographed works for both of the Ailey professional companies and DTH, Hubbard Street II, and La Bale Da Cidade, among others, as well as works commissioned by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, and her own The Francesca Harper Project; has been a principal dancer with Ballet Frankfurt, under choreographer William Forsythe, and a featured performer in Broadway shows; has served as a consultant for major film and stage productions; and has extensive teaching experience, with posts at Juilliard, New York University, Barnard, and The Ailey School's joint BFA program with Fordham University. She is the daughter of the late Denise Jefferson, who directed The Ailey School from 1984 to 2010.

It is this last point, Harper says, that makes her appointment of Ailey II feel like life coming full circle.

“My mother, Denise Jefferson, was always my inspiration and mentor for teaching and giving back to the community. Through her work at The Ailey School she changed the landscape for young aspiring dance artists, including me, and was an unfailing example of courage and compassion. I feel I grew up at The Ailey School, and now, having performed and choreographed around the world, it is profoundly moving to me to come home, accepting the great privilege of leading Ailey II.”

Describing her reaction upon learning of her appointment, Harper says, “It just felt like everything was in alignment. “The moment that everything fell into place there was something that I was embodying,” she said recalling her as a little girl visiting her mother in her own office as head of The Ailey School. Fast forward to today, Harper said, “I thought about the moment that I’m there working in the building again and my daughter comes in to hang out with me and sees my mother’s picture on the 2nd floor and then I think about all we’ve been through and the movement we’ve all been through,” Harper says referring to both her family’s involvement in the early Civil Rights Movement and the current the Black Lives Matter movement and the heightened awareness of the need for diversity, equity and inclusion, for Blacks and for women, and the Ailey organization’s own legacy of art reflective of the cares and concerns of the world we inhabit. Harper says of her new appointment, “It feels so much bigger than me.”

Ms. Harper and the Ailey organization are also announced the appointment of Lakey Evans-Peña as rehearsal director of the company. A former member of Ailey II herself, Ms. Evans-Peña has been serving as a teacher and advisor for The Ailey School and will continue in that role while taking up her new responsibilities with Ailey II.

Renowned for merging the spirit and energy of the country’s best young dance talent with the passion and creative vision of today’s most outstanding emerging choreographers, Ailey II was founded in 1974 as the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble. Since then, Ailey II has flourished into one of the most popular modern dance companies, combining a rigorous touring schedule with extensive community outreach programs, a reputation that will only be enhanced by Harper’s appointment.