

Wednesday's woman

By Audrey J. Bernard

Francesca Harper is changing the trajectory of The Ailey II Company New York

Francesca Harper, internationally renowned performer, choreographer, director, and multi-disciplinary artist, has changed the trajectory of The Ailey II Company New York after being tapped by Robert Battle, Artistic Director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, to lead the renowned dance company in the 21st century. Harper assumed the duties of Artistic Director of Ailey II, the Ailey organization's acclaimed company of young dancers September 7, 2021, and immediately started preparing for Ailey II's return to the stage. Selected through a rigorous international search guided by Arts Consulting Group, Harper was chosen for the position by Battle and Bennett Rink, Executive Director of the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation.

Ailey II's 2021-2022 season kicked off in December with participation in Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's annual season at New York City Center, in which Ailey II performed in Mr. Ailey's classic *Memoria*, and continued with the company's own 2022 New York City season March 23-April 3 at The Ailey Citigroup Theater, as well as a U.S. tour.

Harper has choreographed works for both of the Ailey professional companies and Dance Theater of Harlem, 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 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.

As Ailey II's Artistic Director, Harper will curate and oversee all aspects of the Company's artistic and educational initiatives while honoring the traditions, legacy, and creative spirit of Alvin Ailey. As an experienced performer and a mentor who has taught and choreographed over the past three decades at The Ailey School, where she was herself a student, she has the ideal outlook to lead young dancers across Ailey II's bridge from the classroom to the stage, sharing the broad spectrum of what it means to be a professional. Reporting to Ailey's

Artistic Director and Executive Director, she will collaborate with artists and administrators across the organization. Harper and the Ailey organization proudly named LaKey Evans-Peña as Rehearsal Director of the company. A former member of Ailey II herself, 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.

Francesca Harper began her professional dance career with Dance Theater of Harlem, after having performed at the White House as a young Presidential Scholar in the Arts, and subsequently was a member of William Forsythe's Ballet Frankfurt (1991-1999), becoming a Principal Dancer in 1994. In Europe, she was chosen to perform with designers Issey Miyake and Gianni Versace and to perform in a film, *Dancing Pleats* that was a 30-year retrospective of Issey Miyake's design work in Japan. She also performed in Miyake's and Versace's fashion shows in Paris and Milan. Following a vocal performance in Frankfurt, she was invited to record her first single, *Slow Groove*, which was produced on a compilation album and distributed in Europe and the U.K. In 2006, she self-produced her own album, *Modo Fusion*, currently available on iTunes. Her first full evening of work as a choreographer, *Dark Violet Light Stone*, was commissioned by The Holland Dance Festival while she was still a member of Ballet Frankfurt.

Harper has performed in Broadway productions including *Fosse*, *All Shook Up*, and *The Color Purple*, and starred as Helene opposite Molly Ringwald in a national tour of *Sweet Charity* (2007) and in Judith Jamison's role in a revival of *Sophisticated Ladies* (2009). She also created her first play for the Cherry Lane Theater in New York, 50 minutes with Harriet and Phillis, produced by Anna Deavere Smith, with her aunt, Pulitzer Prize winning writer Margo Jefferson, and Paul Miller a.k.a DJ Spooky.

She debuted her critically acclaimed one woman show *The Look of Feeling* as a writer, actor, dancer, and vocalist in 2014 in New York City. She was invited to develop a new character for *Punchdrunk's Sleep No More*, jazz vocalist Cecilia Robertson, a.k.a. Ceci, as well as several other roles in the innovative, immersive production. In 2018, Harper was nominated for Best Actress in a Musical by Broadway.com for her role as Billie Holiday



Ailey II Artistic Director Francesca Harper (Photo by Nina Wurtzel)

in a production of *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill*. 3 Her television appearances include *Boardwalk Empire*, *Late Night with David Letterman*, and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. She also served as ballet consultant for the feature film *Black Swan* (2010), directed by Darren Aronofsky and starring Natalie Portman, who won an Oscar for her performance.

Harper was also a featured performer in *Zinnias – The Life of Clementine Hunter* directed by Robert Wilson, touring internationally with the production. She received a Living History Award in 2013 during Black History Month from Long Island University and the Innovation and Technology Award for her choreography for *Fashion Week* with designer Louis Vuitton. She is the writer, producer, composer, and narrator of the documentary film *To Lillian* (2021). Harper has choreographed works for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ailey II, Dance Theater of Harlem, Hubbard Street II, Tanz Graz, and many more companies, including her own The Francesca Harper Project, which she founded in 2005.

The Francesca Harper Project has performed at venues including La Biennale di Venezia, Holland Dance Festival, Harkness Dance Festival, The Colors Festival in Stuttgart, Central Park Summerstage, New York City Center, Har-

lem Stage, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and The Joyce Theater. Harper served as movement director for Nick Cave's *The Let Go*, commissioned by the Park Avenue Armory, which received a Bessie Award for Outstanding Production. Harper is a long-time artistic collaborator with MacArthur Foundation "genius award" visual artist Carrie Mae Weems, rock star Nona Hendryx, multimedia artist Carl Hancock Rux, and Margo Jefferson. Harper was awarded a two-year choreographic fellowship with Urban Bush Women, providing support toward her dance-theater work *An Unapologetic Body*, and a Fellowship at The Ballet Center at NYU. Recent engagements include serving as co-director and choreographer for the musical *Rose's War* and as movement director for Tommy Hilfiger and Zendaya for their fashion show at the Apollo Theater in fall 2019.

During quarantine, Harper was the creator and directorial consultant for 16 world premiere virtual films. Her latest works include a new creation for Wendy Whelan, Associate Artistic Director of New York City Ballet, and renowned poet Marc Bamuthi Joseph. Harper is currently engaged as Executive Producer with Sony Pictures on a series in development. As an educator, Harper has served as a Professor at The Juilliard

School, an adjunct professor at NYU, a former associate professor at Barnard College, and a professor in the Ailey/Fordham BFA program. She is currently pursuing an MFA in performance creation at Goddard College.

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.

Harper recalls how her mother inspired and prepared her for this new appointment. "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," stated Harper. "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." Harper comes full circle with this new position.