



Dancers of Ailey II return after lengthy pandemic pause; "It's a homecoming for me," says artistic director

Francesca Harper

By: Dave Carlin

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NEW YORK - The dancers of Ailey II are back on stage after a long pandemic pause.

The season returns with exciting new works and leader Francesca Harper, who tells CBS2's Dave Carlin she feels like she's just come home.

Carlin had an illuminating conversation with Harper, the renowned dancer, choreographer, singer and writer whose role now is artistic director of Ailey II. On Wednesday the season opened, and she took the stage to introduce her dancers. She has familiarity with Ailey dating back to her childhood. Her mother was a dancer and longtime educator at Ailey, and she counts as her mentors the legend Judith Jamison and Sylvia Waters. She talked about the new work she premiered for the company and how she hopes it brings people hope.

"It's a homecoming for me. It means so much. This is where I grew up, you know. To be asked, invited back to the Ailey building, into the Ailey family is just full circle," Harper said. "My job as the artistic director is to kind of sweep in and inspire." Harper praised the work ethic of the dancers.

"The Ailey II dancers - I never have to push any one of them, and they've been off for 18 months. And then coming back, and they're hungrier and more voracious than ever," Harper said. "They are so savvy and they are so educated I just have to give them morsels and they just fly." Harper explained some of her work.

"In my freedom series ... there's a trio for three women, and those are the three women, Sylvia Waters, Judith Jamison and my mother, and they just appeared in that work the three ladies here. Those are my examples," she said. Why?

"Because they paved the way for me," Harper said. "And also I think they really represent hope. It's been a challenging time for us but I really wanted to create a work, it's like, OK, our hope is always there with us, that we can carry it independently and collectively," Harper said. You may recognize Harper from Dance Theater of Harlem, Ballet Frankfurt, numerous Broadway shows, TV appearances.

The artistic director of Alvin Ailey's first, or main, company is Robert Battle, and he's celebrating 10 years in that role. The main Ailey company returns to the New York City stage this summer.