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## [A Proving Ground Always in Motion](#)

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### Dance



# A Proving Ground Always in Motion

Ailey II has fostered a sense of tenacity as much as technique.

By BRIAN SEIBERT

Ailey II, the second company of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, turns 50 this year. It has always served as a bridge between student and professional life. It has always been filled with ambitious young people aspiring to join the main troupe. And, as members of every generation agree, the experience has always been demanding — extremely so.

"It's a pressure cooker," said Francesca Harper, who has been the artistic director of Ailey II since 2021. The current group, which is performing a 50th-anniversary program at the Joyce Theater beginning Tuesday, consists of a dozen dancers who stay with the company for two-year terms. Between classes, rehearsals and an extensive touring schedule that combines performances with lecture-demonstrations and master classes, those years are tough.

"Alvin often called it a kind of finishing school," said Sylvia Waters, who was the company's artistic director from the beginning until 2012. "It gives them discipline and stamina and teaches them how to take care of themselves." (Between Waters and Harper, the company was led by Troy Powell, who was fired in 2020 for engaging in "inappropriate communications" with adult students at the Ailey School.)

Training dancers was the goal. At the Ailey school in the 1970s, the students "were all obsessed," said Sarita Allen, a former Ailey dancer. "We would stay from early morning to late at night. We wanted to live there. Alvin was always around, and we wanted to do our best for him."

In 1974, CBS offered Ailey the chance to make a television special celebrating the music of Duke Ellington. But the company was on tour. So, he gathered Allen and other students and thought, Allen said, "Maybe I can pass them off as the company." It worked.

While Allen joined the main company, many of the other students became the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble, later known as Ailey II, led by Waters, who had danced with the Ailey company since 1968.

"Our mission was education and outreach," Waters said. At first, the group performed mostly at senior homes, hospitals and prisons. "These people could not get to performances, so we went to them," she said, echoing Ailey's dictum that dance "came from the people" and "should always be delivered back to the people."

Works by Ailey formed the core of the Ailey II repertory, but Waters also commissioned young choreographers, giving them the opportunity to experiment and the dancers the opportunity to work with choreographers. Some of the most important of them made dances for Ailey II before contributing to the main company: Ulysses Dove, Ronald K. Brown, Kyle Abraham, Jamar Roberts, the company's first resident choreographer, is on that list. So is Robert Battle, Ailey's artistic director from 2011 through last year.

All along, Ailey II faced hardship, even tragedy. In 1978, as the dancers were returning from a show in New Jersey, a tractor-trailer crashed head-on into their bus. Several dancers were injured, and all were traumatized. One, Jean DeJean, died from her injuries.

Performances were postponed for many months, and after they resumed, the loss of income created a deficit that took a long time



Above, Ailey II dancers in Francesca Harper's "Luminous." Left, an early version of Ailey II, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary, during the group's appearance on CBS in 1974. Below, Dominique O. Rosales and Yannick Lebrun, who are former members of Ailey II.

to recoup. "I quivered at the end of every year when we learned what the budget was," Waters said. "Would we continue to exist?" Members of the Ailey board periodically suggested that a second company was a luxury that the organization could not afford. "But Alvin," she said, "was always very supportive."

After a performance in 1979, the agency that booked Ailey engagements suggested that Ailey II could handle the overflow, playing the colleges and small towns that the main troupe had outgrown. Arduous bus-and-truck tours across the country followed. This "raised the bar," Waters said, better preparing the dancers to be in a professional company.

For decades, Ailey II did not tour internationally. The idea, Waters said, was to avoid competing with the main company. In 2008, though, Ailey's booking agent realized that there were many theaters, especially in Europe, that wanted an Ailey performance but could not afford one. So, Ailey II began to perform there. The 50th-anniversary tour has stopped in England and Italy and at the prestigious Holland Festival, along with places like Lullin, La., and Temple, Texas.

If there's one destination Ailey II dancers have foremost in mind, though, it's Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Most years, two or three dancers move up, and at least half the members of the main company are alumni of Ailey II. But promotion isn't guaranteed.



EDUARDO PATENA VIA ALVIN AILEY

Terms in Ailey II are more like a two-year audition, since the director of the first company is often around. "They have the inside track," Waters said. "That often starts at the Ailey School or the Ailey/Fordham bachelor's program. The Ailey Student Performance Group, sometimes known as Ailey III, was founded in 1984 and has endured in various forms since then; some of its members graduate into Ailey II. There are also apprentices, who learn several roles so they can step in when someone is injured.

Sometimes, advancement is accelerated. That happened to Yannick Lebrun, who was in his second year with Ailey II in 2007 when he was tapped to fill in for an injured dancer in the main company during its New York season. That was essentially his audition, and as soon as his term with Ailey II ended, he moved up, fulfilling the dream that had drawn him from his home in French Guiana. In 2019, he set a work of his own on Ailey II.

Not moving up is a disappointment, but not a career-ending one. Ailey II dancers have moved on to companies like Dance Theater of Harlem, the Martha Graham Dance Company, Philadelphia and Ronald K. Brown/Evidence, as well as many Broadway shows.

Jasmine Guy, who was with Ailey II from 1980 to 1981, fell in love with the Ailey company by seeing its signature work, "Revelations." She decided not to audition for the main troupe, and because for her, no other company would do, she shifted into acting, starring in the sitcom "A Different World."

"Everything I've done since, I thought, 'What are you all complaining about?'" she said. "On TV, I couldn't believe all the breaks you get. I was used to working a lot harder and longer."

When Ephraim Sykes was in Ailey II, from 2006 to 2008, he had "tunnel vision" about joining the main troupe, he said. It didn't happen. But through Darrell Grand Moultrie, a choreographer he had worked with at Ailey, he got an audition for "The Little Mermaid" on Broadway, the start of a Broadway career that has since included a Tony Award nomination for "Ain't Too Proud" and the title role in the 2023 Encores! revival of "Pal Joey."

As a dancer suddenly required to act, Sykes "leaned into the Ailey training," he said. "At Ailey, there's always a why and an intention behind every step. I learned how to say something." Like Guy, he also knew about the grind. "People are always talking about how hard Broadway is, eight shows a week," Sykes said. "And I'm always like, 'What are y'all talking about?'"

Still, part of the fun of watching an Ailey II performance is to try to guess which dancers will advance. Waters said that when the time for the main troupe's annual audition approached, "all kinds of attitude emerged." She tried to manage expectations with honesty and never told anyone that moving up was a sure thing — well, only once, and she was wrong.

Harper, too, said that there are always surprises, and not just about who is chosen for the first company. "Some dancers that I wasn't sure about when I hired them have turned out to be amazing," she said. "It's the tenacity. You can see which ones fight for it."

Jaryd Farcon is now in his second year with Ailey II, or rather his third, since he started as an apprentice. Being in the company, while definitely hard, he said, "trains you to do anything: Broadway, Radio City, concert dance." He has Broadway in mind, maybe. But really there is one dream. In a few months, he'll know.