



Louisville native and Alvin Ailey Dance Theater Executive Director Bennett Rink comes ‘full circle’

By Eli Keel
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When Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater comes to town Tuesday night to perform at the Kentucky Center for the Arts, they’ll bring along their executive director, Bennett Rink. For the Ailey company, it’s the 10th stop on a 20-city tour, but for Rink, it’s a journey home. The Louisville native will receive a Distinguished Alumni Award from Walden Theatre, where he attended classes throughout high school. Rink spoke with Insider Louisville, discussing Louisville, the arts, the importance of arts education and his love of the Ailey dance company.

Growing up, Rink’s family always was interested in the arts.

“My parents have had a subscription to Actors Theatre of Louisville since, you know, it started,” he says. “My mom goes to Louisville Ballet, we would go to the orchestra.”

Eventually Rink caught the bug and began performing — first in school plays, and then he discovered Walden around his sophomore year in high school.

“That really hooked me,” says Rink. “That became my primary form of being involved with the theater from that time until I graduated from high school.”

Rink managed to leave an impression on fellow Walden classmates and staff.

“While he was at Walden, he was one of the featured male leads, performing Marc Antony in an experimental ‘Julius Caesar,’” recalls Keith Waits, managing editor of Arts-Louisville, who was on staff at Walden when Rink was a student. He left an impression beyond the ones he made on stage. “Bennett was always urbane and sophisticated, even as a teenager, with great taste and intelligence.”

After high school, Rink continued his arts education, graduating from Syracuse University with a bachelor’s in musical theater before making the move to New York City.

“My goal was to be a working actor,” he says. “I pretty quickly realized how difficult that is.”

Rink spent some time auditioning and working temp jobs, but he soon made a crucial discovery about himself.

“I realized I didn’t have the drive — the desire, above all else — to be a performer, but I loved the arts, so I was able to segue into working on more of the administrative side, which is what I’ve been doing ever since.”

Rink started working with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater as an events director in 1994. Many of his primary responsibilities included reaching out to the community and managing the company in its off-stage capacities.



“(I) kinda just fell in love with the mission, with the whole Ailey ethos, which is about obviously dance performance at the highest artist level, but it’s also about education and reaching out into the community and really making dance accessible,” explains Rink.

It’s a mission students in Louisville will get a taste of, as the company will give free master classes at the Youth Performing Arts School and the Kentucky Center’s ArtsReach dance program.

After falling for the Ailey company, Rink rose through the ranks until he became the company’s executive director. He says his arts education has helped him throughout his life.

“Training as an actor both at Walden and Syracuse University, there are really fundamental life lessons you learn,” says Rink. “It’s a collaborative art form — it’s a lot about team work, it’s about listening, being responsive, it’s about things that are useful to me in my professional life to this day, and that’s what I think the arts can do for people.”



While visiting several foundations in New York City last spring, Walden managing director Alison Huff reached out to Rink to see if he’d be willing to discuss his experience as a Walden student.

“I wasn’t even sure he’d take my call,” says Huff. “But when we met, he was so gracious and eloquent about the impact of his theater training on his life and career, that I knew we needed to get him here to receive one of our alumni awards.”

The awards are given yearly, and alumni are chosen by Walden senior staff. Past recipients include famous alums like Jennifer Carpenter, Will Oldham and Jess Weixler.

Rink isn’t famous, but Huff points out his success is no less impressive.

“Alvin Ailey is a remarkable company, and leading it successfully is no small task,” she says.

Founded in 1958, the internationally renowned company first came to prominence under its founder, Alvin Ailey, and is arguably one of the most important dance companies in the world.

In conversation, Rink is quick to turn the subject to his respect for Ailey and his love of the company. When asked why Ailey has managed to have such a robust life after the death of its founder, Rink replies, “I think it really was the genius of Alvin Ailey — the man. He never made the company about his work exclusively, he always brought in various choreographers, artists and musicians to create work.”

The breadth of inclusive creativity will be on display during Tuesday’s concert, which features two classic works by Ailey, as well as contemporary works by Ronald K. Brown and Christopher Wheeldon.

Rink is very excited to receive the recognition from his hometown and thrilled to share with Louisville the company he calls home.

“I couldn’t be happier to come home to Louisville to be receiving the award from the wonderful Walden Theatre and to see the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater on the stage of the Kentucky Center for the Arts, where I have seen so many incredible performances through the years,” says Rink. “It’s really a full circle moment.”

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater takes place at 7:30 p.m. on Tuesday, March 15, at the Kentucky Center. Tickets start at \$25. There will be a reception for Rink before the performance.