Ai.ley II: Young, gifted, talented and thrilling

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March 9 to April 2, the Alvin Alley Repertory Ensemble, also known as Al.ley II, swings into New York fresh off a 23-city tour for a two-week engagement at NYU’s Skirball Center. Critics have called the 12 talented performers in Al.ley II “spectacular,” “the younger version of Alvin Alley American Dance Theater,” full of “youthful promise” with “dazzling technique” and “off-the-charts energy.”

Back in 1974, when Alvin Alley launched Al.ley II, it had a dual mission: preparing talented young dancers for the next level of their careers while taking dance into venues where size and/or budget made hosting the main company impossible. Well, thanks to the high caliber of the talent Al.ley II attracts, it has been both a training ground and a launching pad for some serious talent. Just ask current AAADT company members Jacqueline Green, Pana Tesfagorgis, Jamar Roberts and Daniel Haeder, among others. That means Al.ley II audiences get to see tomorrow’s stars today.

That is also true of the choreographers whose works are featured in Al.ley II programs. Thanks to Troy Powell, the company’s current artistic director, and Artistic Director Emerita Sylvia Waters, who Al.ley handpicked four decades ago to lead the new venture, the company has featured an impressive list of young choreographers, including Kyle Abraham, Jamar Roberts and others.

Powell said, “Al.ley II’s mission is based on nurturing the wonderful gifts of these dancers and choreographers. The up and coming dancers that we groom for the two years they’re with Al.ley II are not only very talented, they’re very mature.” Powell said Al.ley II has evolved into something more than a training ground. “In fact, we’re definitely at a level where this company has its own identity,” he explained. “Al.ley II has traveled all over the world and performed in amazing venues because of these talented dancers and the fact that they’ve evolved so much artistically, technically and professionally.”

A recent interview with two Al.ley II dancers—Khali. Campbellbell and Joc. Pru.itt—together. Another ingredient of the company’s success is its energy level and enthusiasm. Both dancers exude the type of contagious energy and excitement that can inspire sparkles when they take the stage. Bubbly and breathless, Campbellbell described her career journey from LaGuardia High School to a gig with former AAADT dancer Sarita Allen, to classes at Dance Theatre of Harlem and then the Al.ley School and an audition that landed her an apprenticeship and then membership in Al.ley II.

“In April, I’ll have been with the company a full year,” she said. “To be able to perform in my hometown where my family, friends, teachers—everyone from my day care center to high school—can come and see me perform, well, I’m so excited.”

Pruitt is equally excited about the upcoming Skib. ball season, even though he’s nearing the end of the standard two-year stint with the company. Pruitt recalled the serendipitous journey that involved his best friend joining the company, a chance meeting with Powell and an invite to take a company class that led to an invite to join Al.ley II. As luck would have it, the company was about to go on tour when another dancer fell ill, and Pruitt had to step in on a moment’s notice and begin his stint earlier than expected by learning three dances in four days.

“It was wonderful,” Pruitt said. “Being part of Al.ley II is the greatest blessing ever. Everyone is in a similar place in their life and the energy level is so high because we all want this so much. Also, because we’re a small troupe, everyone is well utilized. It’s fantastic.”

Pruitt hastened to add that the NYU Skib. ball season is special for another reason. “I am so excited that I get to perform at my alma mater, NYU,” he said.

Imagine 12 dancers hitting the stage all equally excited. Add choreography that delights and challenges them. Stir and what does it get? Powell says, audiences will get an Al.ley II season that stacks up as something special as he runs down the list of dances featured during the upcoming season.

On the bill are two different programs—one highlights all new works and the other contemporary favorites. The new works include “Circular,” a blend of classical and contemporary ballet by Princess Grace Award-winning Joo Man Joo, “Stream of Consciousness” by former Al.ley dancer Marcus Jarell Willis, described as an exploration of the tumultuous monologue within one’s mind, and “Sketches of Flame,” Bridget Moore’s rapturous fusion of flamenco influences with her African-American and contemporary aesthetic.

The program of contemporary favorites includes French choreographer Lela Da Rocha’s unique “Meika,” the return of AAADT dancer Jamar Roberts’ “Gemeos,” set to Fela Kuti’s contagious Afrobeat, Al.ley School alum Jean Embégi’s poignant “In & Out” with its spicy mix of dance techniques and Ray Mercer’s “Something Tangible,” a reflection on love, passion, fear and self-doubt.

Powell said each program is a carefully chosen recipe for success, explaining that one of the joys of being at the helm of Al.ley II is that he gets to choose works that not only challenge the dancers but also thrill the audience.