

MIAMI Alvin Ailey instructors share their best steps

BY CAITLIN RANDLE
crandle@miamiherald.com

While the upbeat jazz of Duke Ellington played in the background, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater instructors taught their choreography to a group of students Feb. 16 at Miami's Phillis Wheatley Elementary School.

The school doesn't have a dance program of its own, and many of its students have never had the opportunity to take dance lessons before.

Toussani Parker, 9, said the lessons were a step toward fulfilling her lifelong dream of being a dancer.

"When I was a little child, I always dreamed about dancing," Toussani said. "Ever since I was a little girl, dancing was my life. I loved it."

Ailey dancers have been traveling the country, from Los Angeles to New York, teaching their original ballet "Night Creature" to third- through fifth-graders from Title I schools, which have a significant number of children from low-income families.

In Miami, they stopped at Charles R. Drew Magnet School — which Alvin Ailey artistic director Robert Battle once attended — and Phillis Wheatley for a week of classes.

"We look for schools that don't have the funds sometimes to bring in a program like this," said Nasha Thomas, an instructor and national director of Ailey-Camp, the theater's summer program. "This is a very expensive program; we're very fortunate to have sponsors."



CAITLIN RANDLE crandle@miamiherald.com

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater instructor Winston Brown performs some of the dance from 'Night Creature' with students during a residency Feb. 16 at Phillis Wheatley Elementary School.

The students chosen are all beginners who have never had professional lessons.

"These children have had no experience with dance," Thomas said. "So it's an introduction and it really is about them having fun, being creative."

Thomas said the kids use their imaginations to design the final dance, with

the help of the instructors.

"Night Creature" was first choreographed by Alvin Ailey in 1974. It's a lighthearted ballet about the creatures that come out at night, filled with comedic elements and set to the music of Duke Ellington, according to Thomas.

"One of the exercises they did was they created nocturnal animal dances,"

she said. "They had to choose a group — we have bats and foxes and wolves — and they had to think about how these animals move, the characteristics that they're known for and how we show that through movement."

Besides the choreography, students also learn about music, the history of dance and poetry. Each

lesson ends with a writing assignment. One such assignment was to write a haiku about the moon.

Phillis Wheatley Principal Cathy Williams said her school was chosen because of its proximity to the Adrienne Arsht Center, where the Alvin Ailey company performs Thursday through Sunday.

"I believe they want to provide our school, which is in a low socioeconomic neighborhood, an opportunity to participate in a program where the students may not be able to afford their own professional dance classes," Williams said.

Williams chose students to participate in the program who she believed would be interested in learning more about dance.

"Our principal saw us dancing in the hallway or in our classroom," said Voltaire Thompson, 11, who participated in the classes. "We went to the library, and she told us a little bit about the program and she asked us if we wanted to do it, and we had permission slips for our parents to sign."

Toussani Parker said she saw a dance class practicing once and wanted to join it.

"I saw this class at Hadley Park," Toussani said. "They started dancing and I tried some of the moves. I did the moves so good, and the teacher saw me and she instantly wanted me to be in her class."

Voltaire and Toussani both said they loved being in the program. Voltaire said his favorite part of the classes was the warm-up dance, while Toussani said her favorite part was learn-

ing the "Night Creature" choreography.

The students will go to the Arsht Center on Friday to watch an Ailey performance, including the ballet they learned in class.

Some of the older youngsters are also eligible to apply for AileyCamp, a six-week, no-cost summer day camp, which is open to ages 11 to 14.

"That is an opportunity for them to continue to dance if they have an interest in it," Thomas said. "We've identified some very talented students and a lot of times that's how they get picked."

Children don't have to audition to join the camp. They're chosen based on one-on-one interviews.

"We look for the children who want to be there," Thomas said. "That want to come to camp every day, that perhaps even had a lot of opportunities for a special program like this."

Thomas said sometimes the kids are chosen because they're going through personal struggles.

"Children who are maybe struggling in school, who don't have a lot of support at home," Thomas said. "Children who have low self-esteem. Maybe some bullies or children who fight a lot in school. Those are the things that we're looking for because it really is about the development of the child."

Thomas said the program is about more than just dance: "It's a dance camp, but it really is about teaching them life skills. How to be a productive young person and how to change."