

Choreographer Juel D. Lane brings Atlanta flavor to Ailey II

By: Cynthia Bond Perry

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Destination Dance, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's initiative to produce year-round programming in Atlanta, will wrap up its pilot season this weekend with performances that could launch a locally based choreographer to new heights.

Juel D. Lane will make his choreographic debut with Ailey II, the organization's second company, with "Touch & Agree (2017)," which premieres Oct. 21 alongside Renee I. McDonald's "Breaking Point" and Ailey's "Revelations" at the Rialto Center for the Arts.

It's a promising end to the first year of the Ailey initiative, which builds on the company's 42-year history with Atlanta and responds to the increasing demand for Ailey performances, workshops and other events.

Atlanta is the sixth stop on Ailey II's 32-city tour, which will give Lane unprecedented exposure across the U.S., France and Spain. The recognition is well-deserved, said Ailey II Artistic Director Troy Powell, who has followed Lane's work for 15 years.

"He's reached that peak where he's definitely evolved as a choreographer," said Powell. "He's psychologically ready, and I think he's choreographically ready."

Lane's fleet fusion of modern dance, hip-hop and African dance styles inspired by personal stories and everyday encounters constitutes an original voice and demonstrates that Atlanta has as much to give back to Ailey as Ailey brings to its Atlanta fans.

The long-limbed choreographer discovered his voice — literally — during his youth in Atlanta. He struggled with a stutter, which he overcame while studying dance and drama with Dawn Axam and Freddie Hendricks at Tri-Cities High School.

He completed the University of North Carolina School of the Arts' dance program in 2002 and arrived soon after at Powell's dance class in Manhattan. Powell enjoyed teaching Lane and appreciated his sense of fluidity and mobility, rare for a male dancer.

The following year, Lane joined Ronald K. Brown's Evidence dance company, where he absorbed African influences and storytelling elements of Brown's style. Lane's artistry matured under Brown's direction.

"Seeing this gay male in charge, but also very clear about who he was, gave me a little bit more confidence to just be who I am and own that," Lane said.

Six years later, he returned to Atlanta to pursue choreography and explore other dance, theater and film interests. A turning point came when he was challenged to create a male duet on the topic of sexuality for Lift, an artists collective of male choreographers and dancers. Lane saw a chance to delve into personal experience and clarify his identity as a gay black man without shame.

The result was “Waiting,” a duet about a same-sex relationship set to Sam Cooke’s “You Send Me,” and other pieces. An intricate, physical conversation of actions and reactions, the piece featured the dancers shifting between opposing and supporting one another. After one show, an audience member told Lane he saw himself and his wife in the duet, a sign that the piece had universal appeal and potential for further development.

The opportunity to expand “Waiting” came a year later when Lane was teaching at his alma mater in North Carolina. He named the work, “Touch & Agree” in reference to the moment during church services when members of the congregation reach out to greet one another.

“When you enter somebody’s life, and you start to physically, mentally touch them, you’ve got to make sure that you can agree to disagree,” Lane said. “You’re sharing your life with somebody, and you’re bringing somebody into your world.” A relationship can be dangerous and scary, Lane said, “but the thing about it is, how do you navigate within it to make it work?”

When Powell, now artistic director for Ailey II, asked Lane to set choreography for the company, Lane again turned to “Touch & Agree.” It was so deeply rooted in his own identity and personal experience, he thought it was the best way to introduce himself to the world.

Powell respects Lane for taking a risk with subject matter that could challenge audiences. Gay identity can be a sensitive topic for some, he said, but society has come a long way toward accepting LGBTQ culture. He believes Lane’s piece can enlighten people with its larger themes of struggle and survival. His faith in Lane’s potential clearly outweighs any risk on Powell’s part.

Lane spent three weeks in rehearsals updating and expanding “Touch and Agree” to a full, four-section piece. “Waiting” evolved from the initial duet. “Cookie Jar” explores bisexuality. “Transparent” addresses transgender labels, and “Legendary” pays homage to the New York ballroom scene, historically a place of refuge for many LGBTQ people.

The overarching message? “Just love who you love, and celebrate it,” Lane said.

He also worked on clarifying his style, uniquely flavored with Atlanta hip-hop, voguing and natural street movement. He challenged dancers to capture the essence of his voice and encouraged them to dig deep into their experiences to express honest emotions, a process which led many of them to discover more about themselves. One dancer believed that difficulties in her personal life were holding her back emotionally. Lane urged her to tap her personal feelings.

“Be vulnerable,” he told her. “If you feel like you messed up, keep going. If you feel pain, work through that pain.” She recalled those emotions and added them into the movement, Lane said. She was crying, even as she danced with clarity and urgency, and Lane knew they were on the right track.

“It felt good to have just everybody wanting to fight hard,” Lane said. “To not please me, but to please themselves.”

Ultimately, Powell said, Lane helped dancers gain confidence in themselves by living his own mantra: “Be yourself. Know who you are. Own who you are.”

The results of Lane’s choreography have exceeded Powell’s expectations. He hopes Ailey II helps Lane ascend to new heights in the field, possibly to create a work for the main company of Alvin Ailey. It would be a leap, but according to Powell, Lane showed he has what it takes — a willingness to take risks, to tell his story and to challenge dancers technically and psychologically, all the while enjoying the journey.

DANCE PREVIEW

Ailey II. 8 p.m. Oct. 21. \$34.85-\$69. Rialto Center for the Arts. 80 Forsyth St. NW, Atlanta. 404-413-9849, rialto.gsu.edu.

Excerpts of Lane’s “Touch & Agree” will be performed 8 p.m. Oct. 20 in a free concert at Woodruff Park during Elevate Atlanta’s public art festival.