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Social justice with a beat

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Miami native debuts Ailey dance work

In 2016, during the U.S. presidential elections, world-class dancer Jamar Roberts was on a European tour. He said that everywhere he went, people seemed to be musing over the controversial political scenario.

“It seemed like the whole world was watching for the outcome,” he said, “and sharing the same feelings of anxiety and uncertainty as to its and impact on everyone.”

Roberts, a Miami native, processes that tumultuous moment through physical language. It was in that context that his choreography debut for the Alvin Ailey American Theater emerged. “Members Don’t Get Weary” is an artistic portrait and meditation on the current American social landscape, it speaks to a mix of worries about the economy, social injustice and violence.

But with all the weight of its matters, the immersive performance taking center stage at the Adrienne Arsht Center on Feb. 22 is an invitation for the audience to take a moment to transcend their “blues” and take delight in personal freedom. It moves and communicates to people through movement and rhythm, as well as the music by jazz saxophonist and composer John Coltrane.

“Jazz was born from the blues, you can’t have one without the other,” Roberts said. “The theme music alludes to the company and its African-American heritage. It is meant to be cathartic from an emotional standpoint.”

The sheer weight of Robert’s childhood story in Miami, troubled by poverty, and his success in transcending its limitations, perhaps is also handled in the piece. Through many years of hard work and persistence, he is now one of Ailey’s top-ranking dancers and has garnered accolades such as the “Outstanding Performer” at the prestigious New York Dance and Performance “Bessie” Awards and was a guest star with London’s Royal Ballet. Dance Magazine featured him as a “25 to Watch” in 2007 and on the cover in 2013. He has performed at the White House in 2010 and as a guest star on “So You Think You Can Dance,” “Dancing with the Stars,” and the “Ellen Degeneres Show.”

Every year, Roberts, 35, serves as an inspiration to students at Dance Empire studio, where he has returned regularly to teach and choreograph since he left Miami for New York, in 2001. This month he will mentor youngsters through an intermediate level and above community dance class and a master workshop for New World School of the Arts and Coral Reef Senior students, both to be held at the Arsht Center.

Roberts said that “Miami dancers are hungry for mentoring, the city has been good at capitalizing in its diversity and energy, but it still has no major contemporary dance company. I was once in these students’ shoes, wanting to be good, to become a professional, and not having the resources to move on up.”

Led by Liberty City native and artistic director Robert Battle, Ailey’s Feb. 22-25 program in Miami will also showcase “Shelter,” a portrait of homelessness and “Stack-Up,” inspired by Los Angeles’ urban landscape and the lives of its disparate inhabitants. The troupe will perform Ella, a duet celebrating the centennial Ella Fitzgerald’s birth and its 1960 signature masterpiece Revelations, a reflection on slavery set to African-American gospel and blues, among other pieces.

Roberts urges people to watch “Members Don’t Get Weary” with an open mind, rinsed of all preconceptions, observe as its rich texture unfolds and unravels, and appreciate the artistic beauty he tries to ingest in everything he does.

“The audience can still expect to see something beautiful out of all that.”