Talking Pre-Show Rituals, Self-Care, New Season Highlights, and More with Ailey II's Jessica Amber Pinkett

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Every March, when NYC is deep in the winter blues, Ailey II's exciting season fires up at just the right moment. And this year is no different: They've got a roster of fiercely talented dancers, and a slew of premières (as well as returning favorites) to boot. Dance Spirit caught up with Jessica Amber Pinkett, now in her second season with Ailey II, for a rundown on her rehearsals, pre-performance rituals, and more.

_Dance Spirit: How's the season prep been going so far?_
Jessica Pinkett: Our season prep had been going beautifully! We have essentially been preparing since we started rehearsals last summer. It may seem a bit far out to be preparing, but it's important to ensure the cohesiveness and quality of each Ailey II group. We work as a family, grow as a family, and perform as a family. Rehearsals are always challenging—especially on the road—but we all do our part to make sure things go as smoothly as possible. This year's season is going to be nothing short of excellent.

**DS: Can you tell us a little bit about the pieces in which you're dancing?**

JP: The new works I'm in are Breaking Point, choreographed by Renee I. McDonald; Touch & Agree, choreographed by Juel D. Lane; and Road To One, choreographed by Darrell Grand Moultrie.

Breaking Point is booming, bold, and in your face. It's about the hopes, dreams, aspirations, and desires we're actively striving towards—until we ultimately reach our breaking point. The movement pairs perfectly with the message. The choreo is complex and athletic, testing our bodies and boundaries until we reach our own breaking points within the work.

Touch & Agree is all about relationships, about never wanting to lose who you are even when attached to another person. It's an exploration of oneself in this sea of people, allowing yourself to shine through as you are. Juel's choreo is his voice in movement form: There's hurt, love, and passion, and it's as clear as day onstage. He let our emotions run freely—I think I cried almost every day of rehearsal.

Road To One is about legacy and humanity, paying homage to all the mentors that build, motivate, and inspire the next generation. The work allows us to showcase our individuality, but stresses the importance of moving, breathing, and flourishing as a unit, as well. Darrell challenged my way of thinking, moving, and being—I grew so much as a person and dancer because of him. Performing his piece is an absolute pleasure.

As for the returning works, I'm performing in Stream of Consciousness, choreographed by Marcus J. Willis; Sketches of Flames, choreographed by Bridget Moore; and Circular, choreographed by Jae Man Joo.

**DS: How have the rehearsals differed from piece to piece, choreographer to choreographer?**

JP: Every choreographer's vision is different, which means the dancer's focus and intention has to also change. Some rehearsals are more about the technical aspect of the movement and less about the narrative (if there is one). Other rehearsals are about tapping into your character and your emotions and allowing them to be the driving force behind your movement. No matter what the rehearsal calls for, I always take a deep breath, create a new space to work in my head, and prepare my body for the shift. This allows me to really challenge my mind and my body, and delve deeper into the choreographic process.
DS: Do you have any pre-performance rituals?
JP: Before every show I take out my journal and a framed picture of my grandmother, Shirley Pinkett. She passed many years ago, but having this picture of her brings me so much comfort. I journal my current thoughts and feelings—placing them on paper gives them a place to rest instead of having them bounce around inside my head. I also take a moment to pray and meditate. Music is another vital part of my pre-performance ritual. My playlist ranges from Beethoven, to Londrelle, to H.E.R, to Kendrick Lamar—I love a variety of music!

DS: How have you kept your body in check while balancing so many rehearsals?
JP: First and foremost, I am very aware of what I put in my body. Don't get me wrong, I will always make room for the occasional bag of chips or piece of cake, but I am conscious of what I eat. I try to get in lots of raw fruits and veggies, smoothies, multivitamins, and supplements, etc. I also make sure that I go to the gym as often as I can, and when I can't, I do my own exercises at home, or when we're on the road touring. I also cannot stress enough the importance of staying hydrated! I drink a lot of water and tea, and I do a cleanse once a week. Last but not least, I do my best to get plenty of sleep. I'll even catch a nap during the day if time allows. I always need to keep my body in tip-top shape so that I can perform at my absolute best.

DS: What's your best piece of advice for younger dancers?
JP: Your art, your passion, your love, and your light are meant to be shared. Don't be afraid to be vulnerable—to be vulnerable is your greatest asset. Share your story with the masses and allow yourself to showcase the best version of yourself. Keep doing the work. Keep pursuing your passion aggressively. Remain grateful and remain humble. You won't know what power resides inside of you until you tap into it and challenge yourself. To pursue dance as a career, you have to be a little insane. If you can put yourself through all of the physical, mental, and spiritual shifts that dancers go through and still want to wake up every day and do it all over again, that is a clear indicator that dance is more than just a hobby for you. Let your movement be your voice.

DS: What do you love most about dancing with Ailey II?
JP: Traveling to new places! I've been able to see so much of the world because of this glorious opportunity. To meet all of these people who are united through the universal language of dance warms my heart. I especially love meeting young dancers who are moved, motivated, and inspired by our performances. One moment I will never forget is when we finished performing in Castres, France, and two young girls sprinted down the street to get their programs signed by myself, Tara Bellardini, and Khalia Campbell. They were out of breath and didn't speak any English, but you saw the passion and excitement in their eyes.

I aspire to inspire. I remember growing up and not seeing many dancers of my likeness. There was a point in time where I thought young black girls weren't meant to be dancers, but the Ailey company changed that for me. I can now tell young black boys and black girls that dance is a wonderful career choice, and that if this is something they genuinely want to do, they should pursue it. I want to be a shining beacon of hope for this generation, and I want people to see what I have done, and to know that this is an option for them. I am proud of my successes, and hope to exceed them, and for others to as well. Ailey II has given me a platform to share myself with others and I am extremely grateful for this.

Catch Jessica and the rest of Ailey II March 14–25 in NYC!