

Alvin Ailey Returns for New Season of Choreographic Splendor

By: D. Kevin McNeir

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Hope Boykin, 20-Year Veteran of Dance Theatre, Prepares for Final Bows

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The internationally-acclaimed Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre [AAADT] has returned to the District much to the delight of faithful fans and fittingly during Black History Month, with a mixture of classic favorites, new productions and exciting premieres on the Kennedy Center's Opera House stage for seven performances – now through Feb. 9.

Robert Battle, artistic director, leads the iconic company long heralded for its contributions to and impact on the world of modern dance while celebrating the Black cultural experience. Premieres choreographed by Donald Byrd and Ailey dancer Jamar Roberts illustrate the company's commitment to highlighting

social issues with "Greenwood" and "Ode," respectively. Darrell Grand Moultrie's "Ounce of Faith," a work for 12 dancers which focuses on the powerful, lasting impact of a teacher's influence on a young child, will make its D.C. premiere.

Roberts' "Ode" serves as a meditation on both the beauty and fragility of life occurring during a time of escalating gun violence, set to a jazz score and featuring costumes designed by the choreographer. The piece serves as the first in a three-part series which Roberts is creating in his new role as AAADT's first-ever resident choreographer.

Byrd's work, his fifth for the company, centers on the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre in the city's segregated Greenwood District which will mark its centennial next year. The ensemble piece will navigate through one of the worst incidents of racial violence in American history.

But for one dancer, well-known to



AAADT in Alvin Ailey's Revelations. (Courtesy photo/Nan Melville)

and much respected by this writer, this touring season will be one that could be aptly described as bitter-sweet as she prepares to take her final bows, bringing an end to a stellar 20-year career with AAADT.

"It's been love and a lot of hard work – it's been the best of everything," said Hope Boykin who will be a featured dancer in "A Case of You" along with dancer Clifton Brown.

"Dance has been a struggle but glorious – painful but harmonious. I've been on stage while in pain and tears but have always been smiling simply because I'm there. One of my favorite books describes what athletes endure when playing injured and says true professionals do not wait until they're well to do their best work. You

just take two aspirins and do it."

Boykin recalls times during which she wondered if she'd ever be able to return to the stage after as serious injury suffered last year forced her to miss the company's annual stop in the District. She would undergo surgery and four months of rehabilitation. Then, last November, another injury forced her to rethink her future.

"I was not ready to stop, not yet. I was determined to go on, to give 100 percent each day and to treat each day as if it were my last performance. I've learned to refuse to ever hold back. In fact, I do even more than anyone, including me, might expect."

Boykin says she will always be grateful for being given the opportunity to join AAADT – something

that could well have remained just a dream given her unique body size and the criticisms she received from directors like Jamison and mentors who had made a name for themselves as professional dancers.

"It was my mother who reminded me the number of times I heard 'no' and that I always refused to listen," she said. "Judith was among a handful of directors who told me that I had great potential but first I would need to find my best body. And I did. She gave me a chance and I realized that I was in charge of my future."

"It's a lesson I learned very early and continue to share with young students. Someone has to let you in

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the door. But you have to be prepared to strive even harder than you ever imagined and believe that there are no limits to what you can achieve."

While this marks her final season with AAADT, the future looks bright. Boykin will return to the District in August, again at the Kennedy Center, sharing her gifts, talents and experience for the second year in a row with young dancers (ages 9 – 12) in her stead as the Center's Artistic Lead for the KC Dance Lab – a two-week intensive training seminar which focuses on empowering the youth to be dancers of impact.

"Sometimes you have to be willing to create a lane of your own and envision yourself on stage. I've celebrated being in my lane and taking my place

before the audience," she said. "And I teach and challenge my students to do the same."

The company, whose origins can be traced to 1958 with its founder Alvin Ailey, and later directed by Ailey's hand-picked former sardou dancer and choreographer, Judith Jamison, has come to the Kennedy Center on an almost annual basis since the Center's opening performance in 1971 when AAADT participated in the world premiere of Leonard Bernstein's "Mass," choreographed by Ailey.

Tickets can be purchased at the Kennedy Center box office, by calling Instant Charge at (202) 467-4600 for those living in the area or at (800) 444-1324 for those residing outside of the DMV.

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