

**Dance Up Close to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Rehearsing Aszure Barton's "LIFT"**

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By Christine Jowers

Scene: Alvin Ailey American Dance Center, 5th Floor Studio, Company Rehearsal. Feels like every dancer in the company is in the room. Mood: Anticipatory Herculean figure, Jamar Roberts, leans to one side and lengthens his magnificent arms across the 5th floor studio. He reaches out as if to become the horizon, or maybe to remind us that he is the lord of it.



By Christine Jowers [View Profile](#) | [More From This Author](#) Published on December 2, 2013  
AAADT in Aszure Barton's "LIFT" Photo by Paul Kolnik

[Hope Boykin and Matthew Rushing of AAADT Share Wisdom at Rehearsal in Rehearsal for Aszure Barton's LIFT, a world premiere for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater](#)  
Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is at New York City Center for a five week holiday engagement-December 4th 2013- January 5, 2014  
[\(LIFT's opening night is Friday, December 6th\) for information and tickets click Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater](#)

Drumbeats, like thunder, crackle and the roomful of dancers respond by rushing to meet them. They collapse away from the sound to become all shaking knees and willowy arms. The music wraps around the dancers, pushing, pulling, consuming. We are in a thrilling place, wondering what will happen next.

A Minute of Regal Rhythm with Jamar Roberts of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Rehearsal for Aszure Barton's LIFT

Suddenly, break. Cut sound. Apparently the knee shakes were not loose or furious enough. Jonathan Emanuell Alsberry, rehearsal director for Aszure Barton, offers some insight, one tip being "very scarecrow" (imagine The Wizard of Oz). Barton travels around the room whispering notes to groups of very serious looking people.

"Let's try that again," Barton nods towards Masazumi Chaya, the associate artistic director of the company, who, for a time, is manning the music area. Everyone gathers in corners to chat (about work, the mood is not frivolous). Dancers quietly repeat steps and counts in the background, some follow the performers being looked at by Alsberry and Barton as the propulsive, spellbinding score by Curtis Macdonald begins to play once more.



Hope Boykin and Matthew Rushing, Two Veteran Artists from Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Share Rehearsal Wisdom

Aszure Barton has collaborated with and choreographed for the likes of Mikhail Baryshnikov, The American Ballet Theatre, and the Martha Graham Dance Company, among other greats. Described by critics as “vulnerable, feisty, infectious and fearless” this young artist's choreography is highly sought after. Today she is in the Ailey house finishing off the last bit of a five-week work period for her dance LIFT, a world premiere for the company. This extra rehearsal time is a big shift from the usual three weeks per ballet that the company is often allotted during the season. (I am reminded that the AAADT dancers perform 20-30 ballets a season, often learning multiple roles in each ballet. Lots of responsibility.)



“This is very unique as far as the way the Ailey organization is used to working,” remarks Matthew Rushing, performer with the company since 1992, now the company’s rehearsal director and a guest performer. “We’re used to a certain rhythm...and Aszure has come in and kind of broken that...but I think.... because we are, in a sense, out of our comfort zone ... I see from my peers that different things are being brought out of the them...That’s why I think something special is going to come out during the premiere at City Center.”

Matthew Rushing's Surprise Role and Rushing with Hope Boykin on What It Takes to be an Ailey Dancer  
Rushing did not expect to dance a role in LIFT; in fact, it took the artist aback when he saw his name on the cast list. “The challenges of being a rehearsal director, and switching into dancer, make the position of dancer new to me...it’s new now,” he admits, seeming a bit surprised himself by this revelation.



Rushing describes his current focus while dancing as, “less on me, and more on the work and other dancers.” How appropriate that at the end of his solo in LIFT, while melodies of marimbas and waterfalls fall on our ears, Rushing faces the group of dancers before him gently shuffling toward them and almost conducting their movements -- his upper body rippling out from his heart.