

## Alvin Ailey brings nonstop dance back to Atlanta

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By Andrew Alexander

The graceful and athletic moves we see when the Alvin Ailey Dance Company performs for a few hours on stage at the Fox Theatre each year actually represent just a tiny fraction of the dancers' outrageously busy schedules. "We're like nonstop," says Rachael McLaren, who has been a principal dancer with the Ailey company for six years. "It's crazy. It's definitely a full-out year for us."

It's fair to say that every year is a "full-out" year for the dancers, but this one will be especially arduous. The company, having just completed its New York season in December, kicked off its North American tour on Feb. 1, which runs for 79 performances in 23 cities, including the annual stop at Atlanta's Fox Theatre from Feb. 13-16. Almost immediately after the nationwide tour ends in May, the company will begin its new season at Lincoln Center's Koch Theater in New York. The day after that two-week run ends, the dancers depart for Oslo to begin their international tour, and when that's over, it's back to New York for rehearsals and learning more new reps before the whole thing starts over again.



"We're pretty much a family because we spend so much time together," McLaren says. Dancers either have to learn to make long-distance relationships work, she says, and some have had relationships with - or even married - other dancers. "People don't realize how much alone time we don't have being in a company like this. We're together on stage all the time. We're backstage together all the time. Most of us have roommates on tour. We stay on the bus together, we sit around the airport together. For two or three months at a time, we really become a family." Even on nonperformance days at home in New York, dancers begin early in the morning with a ballet class, and rehearsals can continue well into the evening.

One reason Ailey dancers have to dedicate so much time to what they do is that they have to be proficient in many types of dance, and they have to be able to switch back and forth between styles quickly. "The mark of an Ailey dancer is to be versatile," McLaren says. "Alvin always wanted his company to be a repertory company. That's what we're known for. It is very challenging to be able to go from *The River*, which is technically proficient modern dance with a lot of ballet forms, to hip-hop with only 10 minutes in between to get out of your costume and change your hair. And the audience wants to see brilliance no matter what style it is. It really does limit the type of dancer that makes it into this company."

For its stop in Atlanta, the group has five full performances planned presenting a total of eight works in a mixture of styles and moods. On Thursday night, audiences can check out some of the company's latest contemporary repertoire: there's *LIFT*, a darkly brooding ensemble work by buzzworthy New York choreographer Aszure Barton, and *D-Man in the Waters*, a joyous piece by choreographer Bill T. Jones honoring the defiantly exuberant spirit of one of his own company members who died of AIDS-related complications in the 1990s.

On Friday night, the company presents a full program of classic Ailey works - *Night Creature*, *Pas de Duke*, and *The River* - all of which are set to the music of Duke Ellington. Saturday sees the company performing Ronald K. Brown's *Four Corners*, which draws from West African influences; *Strange Humors*, a duet for two male dancers by the company's current Artistic Director Robert Battle; and *Minus 16*, an eclectic, crowd-pleasing work by Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin which famously pulls a few willing audience members on stage to participate in the dance. (Saturday and Sunday afternoons repeat the programs from Friday and Thursday nights, respectively.) "Atlanta is amazing," says McLaren of the company's annual stop in the city. "The audiences are so wild. I just know Atlanta will be thrilled this year with what we have to offer."

Each program, no matter the lineup, always ends with a performance of Ailey's signature work *Revelations*. McLaren says the repetitiveness of always ending with the same piece can sometimes be a challenge for dancers who are so used to constant change, but ultimately it's audiences' love of that work that keeps it fresh and interesting. "We were in Argentina last year and the company hadn't been there in like 30 years," she says. "There were adults who came up to me with tears in their eyes and said, 'I remember seeing this piece when I was 6. For me to see it again with my adult eyes has meant the world to me.' I hear stories like that time and time again, and it really blows my mind. That alone refreshes my spirit. Those sorts of images stay with me every single time I do *Revelations*. And it's by nature such a buoyant piece. You don't have to do much. You just kind of slip it on and there it is. It is a joy to do every single time."