

By: Gia Kourlas | November 28, 2014

The Music Runs Through Her

The Ailey company's Linda Celeste Sims thrives on work.

By GIA KOURLAS

People used to tell Linda Celeste Sims that she looked like an Ailey dancer. She didn't have a clue what that meant. "I knew it was a modern thing," she said, "but I didn't know the grandness."

When her roommate found out that the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was holding an audition for a female dancer, she dragged Ms. Sims, then 19 and a member of Ballet Hispanico, along.

"I had a very disturbing dream the night before," Ms. Sims, 38, said in a recent interview. "There was a little box, a present with a bow, and it was hopping around. It kind of exploded, like fireworks."

At that audition, 144 dancers showed up; Ms. Sims, still green enough to ask the artistic director, Judith Jamison, what her name was, got the job. "I didn't know who she was," Ms. Sims insisted with nervous laughter. "A smack of humility, I guess. She said, 'Well, my name is Judith Jamison, not JAME-ih-son, JAM-ih-son.' I knew by the way she said it, she was kind of upset."

But that was nothing compared with the way Tina Ramirez, Ballet Hispanico's founder, reacted the next morning. "She said, 'I heard!'" Ms. Sims recalled. "You're fired." She was so upset. I was like her daughter. I was the first protégée to go from the school to the company."

Much has changed since 1996, though the subtle power of Ms. Sims's dancing at Ailey, which performs at City Center beginning on Wednesday, has only deepened. With a face that could only be described as angelic, she is one of the group's most soulful dancers, and not because she takes choreography to a melodramatically spiritual place. Slight and supple, Ms. Sims possesses the kind of silkiness that allows music to run through her. Her dulcet purity always comes as a happy jolt. Her longevity — in all her time at Ailey, she's suffered only a sprained ankle — is mind-boggling.

"It's ridiculous," said Glenn Allen Sims, an Ailey dancer and her husband of nearly 14 years. "But I see all the work she puts in after. She ices every night, she rolls out her body on the foam roller. It's not like, 'O.K., it's 7 p.m., and we're done.'"

Masazumi Chaya, the company's associate artistic director, recalled: "Alvin always said, 'Use my step and show yourself.' She's a good example of a dancer who does that."

This season, Ms. Sims will perform leading roles in many works, including "Cry," "Bad Blood," "Grace" and the company premieres of Christopher Wheeldon's "After the Rain Pas de Deux" and Jacquelyn Buglisi's "Suspended Women." In that exploration of female strength, the dancers, wearing frayed, tattered period costumes, evoke agitation and anguish as they rise and collapse like waves. For Ms. Sims, it's a homecoming: Ms. Buglisi was her Martha Graham teacher at Ballet Hispanico.

"She would stick her foot in your stomach and say, 'Contract!'" Ms. Sims recalled. "She knew she could pull way more out of you than you thought you were giving."

Ms. Sims flourishes on that kind of tough love. As a dance student growing up in the Bronx, she struggled. "My parents worked three jobs sometimes," she said. "They knew nothing about dance, but they knew I needed those ballet slippers that cost \$50. Better make those ballet slippers last for two years."



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A graduate of Fiorello H. La Guardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts, Ms. Sims is half Nicaraguan and half Dominican; it was her Nicaraguan grandmother, a housekeeper at a Hilton hotel, who enrolled her in classes. At Ballet Hispanico, she began with flamenco. "We only had live music," she said. "That's why I don't count to this day. You can't be free dancing and counting."

She loved her voice. "There are a lot of people that do that," she added. "It's so

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Ms. Sims credits the ballet teacher Gabriela Darvash with preserving her body. In her first class eight years ago, she was told to straighten her knee all the way. "In my mind, I'm like, 'It is straight,'" Ms. Sims said. "And then I did it. The next morning, Glenn looked at me and said: 'What did you do? Your legs look long.' My legs just instantly started taking a different shape. In one class. I swear to you, I'm not lying."

Her staying power also comes from the uncanny ability to grow within roles. Her rendition in "Revelations" of "Fix Me, Jesus," which she often dances with her hus-



Linda Celeste Sims, top, at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's studios, and performing with her husband, Glenn Allen Sims, in "Revelations."

band, is spellbindingly quiet. "I really enjoy whenever I can share a moment onstage with her, because what we're actually doing is highlighting our relationship," Mr. Sims said. "We're showing you who we are. If I had my way, I would only dance with her."

In rehearsals, Ms. Sims's intensity is the opposite of her playful offstage persona; you get the feeling that she could dance through a tornado. Her focus helps her stay open, she explained. "As dancers, we are selfish, we are insecure, we are sometimes a bit conceited, and that clogs your arteries," she said. "You clog yourself to the point where you can't breathe, and you can't bring life into anything."

Later, she added: "I was never a hater. I got a lot of hate, but you can't be a hater."

In her early days with the company, she faced jealousy from some of the other women. "But I'm from the Bronx," Ms. Sims said with a smile. "That means if you have a problem with me, that's your issue. I got a lot of that, but what I ended up doing was creating a shell: When I was at work, I was at work."

For her, the new generation of dancers that has recently entered the company has been a breath of fresh air. "I feel their intelligence," she said. "They don't seem to be caught up in that whole: 'I'm in Ailey right now. Now I'm an Ailey diva.' The less people that are in the company who think like that, the better."

As she sees it, there's more at stake. "I want to move people because I'm moved," she said. "It means that in everything I do, I make sure I've investigated it to the point where it's in me. Every time I do 'Fix Me,' I do something different. How can you make something that you do every day taste, look, feel different? That's what separates a dancer and an artist. I want to be an artist."