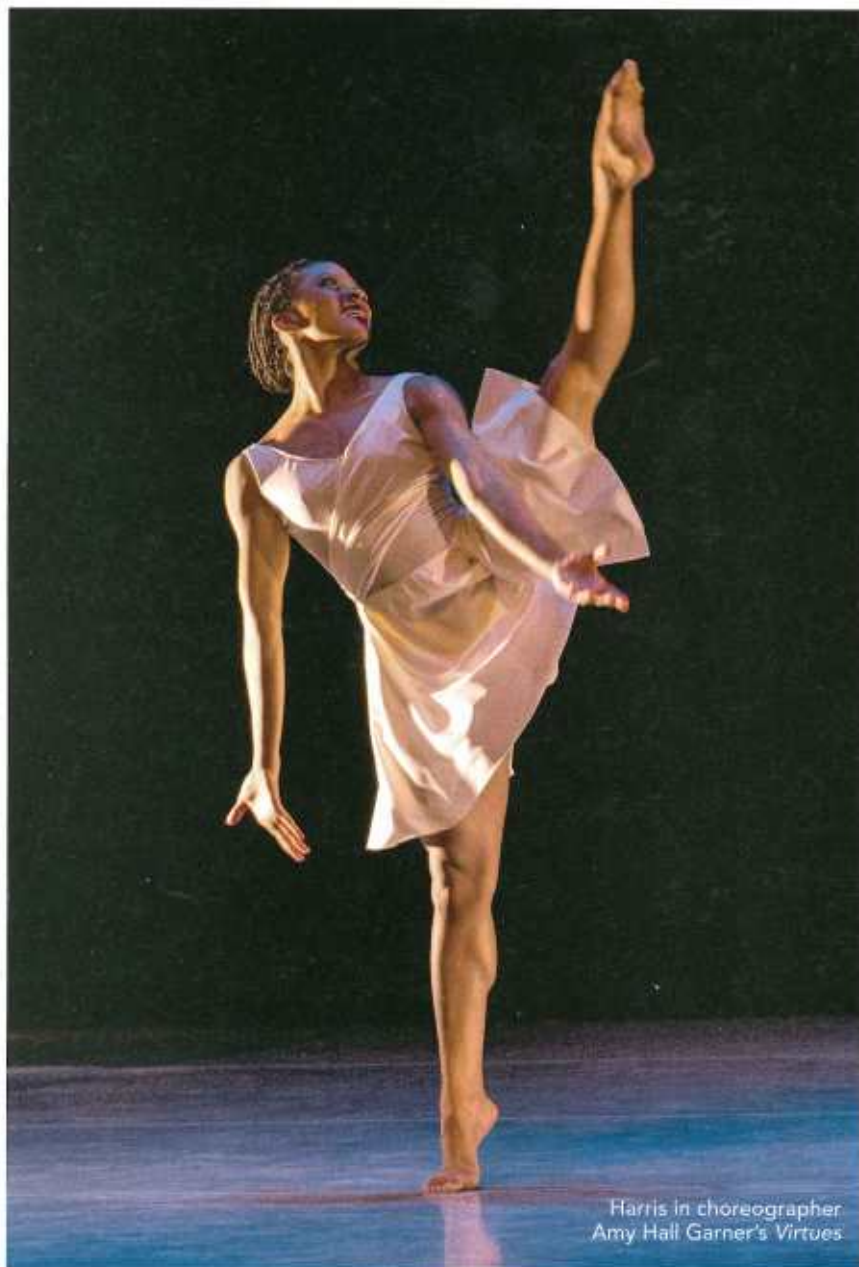


by Jacquelin Harris



Regal and elegant, Ailey's Jacquelin Harris moves easily through the company's challenging repertoire. Growing up in Charlotte, North Carolina, she trained at Dance Production Studios. While earning her BFA in the Ailey/Fordham program, Harris joined Ailey II, where she quickly caught the eye of critics in pieces like Katarzyna Skarpetowska's Cuore Sott'olio, which cast her in a leading role. She joined the main company this past summer, and will dance her first New York season in December.

The question of why I dance is one of the hardest to answer. For me, movement is something that has always come naturally. I've seen videos of my very first dance recital at the ripe age of 2 1/2. I was one of four little girls on an enormous stage, bedazzling in blue rhinestones as I sang "I'm a Little Teapot." While I was supposed to be showing the audience my "handle and spout," I galloped around and waved to my family. Even through adolescence I danced as big and vibrantly as possible. In my eyes, dance is about taking your body as far as it can go. It's moving past physical limitation. It's using your mind to venture physically into unmarked territory.

To dance onstage is a vulnerable act. How you move tells the audience about you as a person, not just a performer.

I always knew that dance was my gift. My mother enrolled me in dance classes, and from that moment, dance became one of the most important parts of my life. I lost my first tooth, tied my first shoe and made some of my closest friends at my studio in Charlotte, North Carolina. My love and respect for dance grew and matured as I did.

As I entered high school, I started to discover different styles of dance. Around 10th grade, I saw North Carolina Dance Theatre perform a contemporary version of *Romeo and Juliet*. I was mesmerized by the artists' grace and delicacy. I decided I needed to enlarge my movement vocabulary.

Once I entered the Ailey/Fordham BFA program, I found what I was looking for—I was challenged by teachers and choreographers to explore unfamiliar worlds. I found that the human body was capable of many different textures and qualities, many of which are inspired by ideas. Thinking of marshmallows or taffy, for instance, can translate into a gooey and deliciously dynamic way of moving. Dance challenges you to become something else while still being yourself.

Every time you dance is a chance to learn more about yourself. To dance onstage is a vulnerable act. The way you choose to move your body tells the audience about you as a person, not just a performer. I dance to release my soul and express myself in a way more sensitive than words. To watch me dance is to watch my heart speak in its most vulnerable form. ■