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Walden Theatre alum returns with Ailey dance company

A DIFFERENT PATH

Elizabeth Garmer

The path to becoming an actor can often lead to something else entirely. Ask Bennett Rink. His eyes were set on the stage when he was a student in the 1960s at Albion High School, active in theater and the speech and debate team. That’s also when he also started taking classes and performing in Walden Theatre’s program.

While Bennett ended up in New York City, he didn’t find his career on the stage but behind it as an executive director of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, which performs at the Kentucky Center on Tuesday, March 15.

To mark what Rink described as “a full-circle moment,” Walden Theatre’ll play a role in his evening with its Inspirational Alumni Award, on stage before the dance company’s performance.

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The 58-year-old organization was founded by choreographer Alvin Ailey, who made a place for African Americans in modern dance with his multi-ethnic company. After his death in 1989 at age 50, his company continued to thrive under dancer Judith Jamison, who retired in 2011 and chose choreographer Roderick P. Williams as her artistic director. Before traveling to London for the award ceremony and performance, Rink talked about how he took his passion for theater and translated it into leading Alvin Ailey Dance Theater.

CJ: How did you get involved in London Theatre?
BR: I was about 15 and in high school at Aleson. I started at Walden in a summer program, and I think it was my mother who found the program. My parents always supported my goals wanting to be an actor and working in the arts. The program involved classes, acting, and performing. That hooked me, and I stayed involved at Walden from then until graduating from high school.

CJ: What are some of your strongest memories from that time?
BR: My most important memory is from the production of “Richard III,” starring David Bowie and Leonard Cohen, and many English-speaking artists including Ray Charles, Nina Simone and Frank Sinatra, recorded English translations of his songs. I was accepted, and I studied theater there and took about five or six dance classes a week. But I wasn’t a natural dancer.

CJ: How did your career develop?
BR: I moved to New York to be an actor, and I auditioned in worked for a couple of years. I realized at a certain point that it was really hard, and I didn’t want to be an actor above everything else.

Then I got a job at a residency center that was the home to American Ballet Theatre and Elgot Feld Ballet and housed rehearsals for dance companies and Broadway shows. That was my transition into the arts administrative world. I managed the schedules in the space. Then, I got involved in development and fundraising effort for the two major ballet companies in New York City. It involved a cabaret fundraising event in 1992 that I got to organize that included people who rehearsed in the building including Liza Minnelli, Gregory Hines and Betty Buckley.

In 1994, I started with the Ailey company, my first job was organizing special events. CJ: What is it like to be a part of the work that the dance company does on stage and working with the resources for it to do that work?
BR: My first realization was how important it is for the fundraising side of a company to meet the artist needs of the dancers. Both have to have the same level of and for working alongside really skilled profession.

CJ: What is your advice to young people today who want to make a life for themselves in the arts?
BR: You never know where you will end up, but you have to try and pursue your dreams. Business is all about who you know. The most important thing is you have to be in your imagination. Don’t limit yourself, but find ways to say yes to opportunities and pursue your dreams.

That’s what I did. And I was lucky to have parents who supported me in that. Reach reporter Elizabeth Kramer at (502) 582-3087 and ekram er@courier-journal.com. Follow her on Twitter @arts.bureau and on Facebook at Elizabeth Kramer-Arts Writer.
Alvin Ailey to make Louisville visit

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While Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre has made frequent appearances on Louisville’s Kentucky Center stage over several decades, this month’s performance marks its first in the city since 2009.

The program, then and now, includes “Revelations,” the company’s signature piece form 1960, as well as other works from the founder. This time, the other work is “Night Creature,” the work he created in 1974 that features symphonic jazz by Duke Ellington.

But what has helped the company stay relevant to artists and audiences over so many decades is the inclusion of older work by other choreographers as well as new works by today’s dance-makers.

Also on the program is Christopher Wheeldon’s “After the Rain,” a duet set to music by Arvo Pärt that made its Louisville debut in 2012 with the Louisville Ballet, featuring guest New York City Ballet artists Wendy Whelan and Craig Hall. Wheelan, a Louisville native, is known as one of Wheeldon’s muse.

Acclaimed choreographer Ronald K. Brown’s “Four Corners” alludes to the Biblical four corners of the world and includes 11 dancers, will make its Louisville debut. Set to the song “Lamentations” by Carle Hancock Rux, the movement is inspired by African and modern dance.

Robert Battle has reinforced Alvin Ailey’s commitment to include works by other choreographers since Battle became artistic director in 2011. That commitment is also reflected in the connections Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre has with other companies and artists, many who have appeared on Louisville stages in recent years.

Just last fall, Parsons Dance Company performed Battle’s stunning “Train,” (2008) jumps to music by Les Tambours du Bronx. Battle was a dancer and choreographer with Parsons Dance earlier in his career before he went on to form his own outfit, Battleworks Dance Company.

Louisville performances by Dance Theatre of Harlem in recent years also illustrate connections with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. In 2012, Dance Theatre of Harlem performed a poetic rendition of Alvin Ailey’s “The Lark Ascending,” which company dancers carried out on pointe rather than barefoot like the original.

When that company returned in 2014, it performed “Vessels” by Darrell Grand Moultrie, who has choreographed for Ailey 2 (the junior company of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater) as well as “Dancing on the Front Porch of Heaven,” by the late choreographer and Ailey company member Ulysses Dove, who created several works for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

The company’s commitment to inclusion, said executive director and Louisville native Bennett Rink, even extends to the community activities it becomes involved in while on tour. During this Louisville visit, the company will be giving a masterclass at the Youth Performing Arts School and working with Kentucky Center’s ArtsReach dance ensemble.

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