

November 22 – November 28, 2012

Renee's last dance

By CHARMAINE PATRICIA WARREN
Special to the AmNews

Tradition continues when the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre (AAADT) returns for the 41st consecutive year to the New York City Center, Nov. 28 to Dec. 30. For artistic director Robert Battle's second year, he again brings a diverse program of premieres, classics and audience favorites.

This year's world premiere is "Another Night," by Kyle Abraham, set to Art Blakey & the Jazz Messengers' rendition of Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia," where he melds his "dynamic facets of American dance"

with that of the individual Ailey dancer. Company premieres are "Battle's Strange Humor" (1998), Jiri Kylian's "Petite Mort" (1991) and, from Tony Award-winning choreographer of "The Lion King," Garth Fagan's seminal work, "From Before" (1978).

By popular demand, there is also the return of Ronald K. Brown's "Grace" (1999), Ohad Naharin's "Minus 16" (1999), Battle's "The Hunt" (2001), Paul Taylor's "Arden Court" (1981) and Rennie Harris' "Home" (2011). Not to be missed are Ailey classics "Love Songs" (1972), "For 'Bird' With Love" (1984), "Night Creature" (1975), "Memoria" (1979), "Cry" (1971) and "Revelations" (1960).

This year, the Honored Guest for the celebrated opening-night gala benefit (Nov. 28) is Academy Award-winning actress and comedienne Mo'Nique, who will serve as honorary chair. Two special evenings are also set aside: Dec. 4, for outgoing executive director Sharon Gersten Luckman, who steps down after two decades; and Dec. 9, for company member Renee Robinson, who will bid farewell to fans after three decades.

As a new company member back in 1981, Robinson remembers always falling down onstage, but thought, "If I could just make it through this first

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year, I would be good. Thirty-one years later, she admits, "It is work" but "it doesn't feel like it's past tense quite yet." Her Ailey career began in the late '70s as a scholarship student in the summer program; soon after, she became a member of the Workshop Company under Kelvin Rotardier, then a member of Ailey II under Sylvia Waters, before being accepted into AAADT.

The highlights of her time with the company are many, but two stand out: learning Ailey's seminal solo for a woman in "Cry"; and working under three artistic directors (Ailey, Judith Jamison and Battle). Though for "Cry" she was one on a list of dancers chosen to first learn, but not necessarily perform the work, she "was thrilled to be part of the list." As it turns out, Robinson was indeed chosen, and she has performed "Cry" many times since, and the accolades for her performance continue.

Robinson was also selected by Mr. Ailey in 1989 as only the second person after Jamison to lead the "Wade in Water" section as the "woman with the umbrella" in "Revelations." A reviewer from the *Village Voice* wrote, "I catch my breath at the truth [Renee] Robinson brings to the moment. There are several sides to virtuosity; one has to do with finesse in details. ... Robinson is magnificent."

For Robinson, being a member of the Ailey organization has been "a joy." Even more confirming is her passion for continuing Mr. Ailey's purpose: "Dance comes from the people and should always be delivered back to the people." As an unofficial mentor for company members, Robinson gives "because that is a part of a familiar process ... that Mr. Ailey and others personify." She doesn't recall the word "mentor" being used in her early years. "People helped you and guided you, and all this falls under the category of discipline ... that was a natural part of maturing. Trees naturally drop seeds," she says.

Whether she accepts the title or not, to many dancers in AAADT Robinson is a mentor. For example, after just two years as a company member, Jacqueline Green attests to

Robinson's attention to others and her need to share: "Her presence is just a breath of fresh air. ... She connects with everyone." In fact, Green said, "I wanted to make sure I was in the chair section when she [Robinson] did her last 'Revelations.'"

Just this year, Green began performing the umbrella role, or what she calls "the ultimate role." She recalls thinking, "If I can do umbrella, it would be a dream within a dream." For Robinson, this is endorsing, because "the roles belong to the generation doing them" and "the ballets were created to be live."

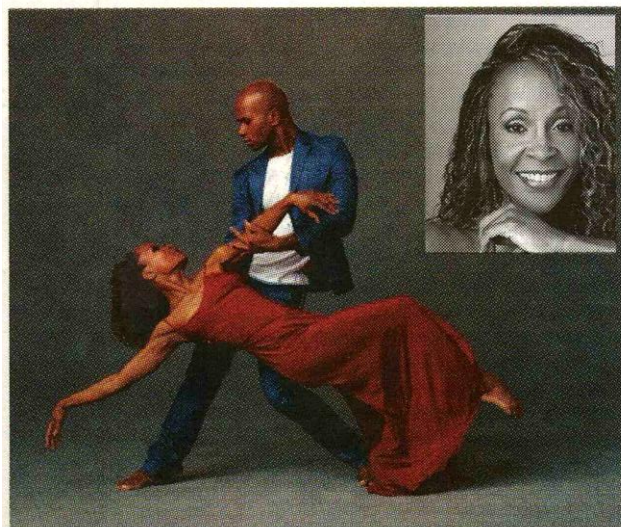
Green will carry on the tradition because being a company member has always been a dream since learning about them in high school at Baltimore School for the Arts. At 14, she auditioned and was accepted into the Ailey School's summer program, but couldn't afford the fees, plus New York was too far away according to her mother. "I was devastated," Green said. In her search for colleges, the Ailey/Fordham B.F.A. Program in Dance was on her list, and she "ended up there anyway." Green would join Ailey II before becoming a member of AAADT in 2011. This season, Green is a featured soloist in Abraham's "Another Night," which for her is "mind-blowing."

The pride and accolades for their fellow company members and new artistic director are effusive. Both Robinson and Green dare audiences to come see the company take on and present the diverse works that Battle brings with true zeal. "This season will vibrate with new energy," says Robinson. About the season, Battle adds, "I'm thrilled to be further expanding Ailey's diverse repertory with new voices and talented contemporary choreographers that showcase the depth and breadth of the dancers' artistry."

Yes, Robinson will be missed, but there is no time for good-byes right now—because as she puts it, "I'm focusing on bringing my best to the stage." Robinson will be leading all performances of "Revelations" during the first two weeks of the season until her final performance on Dec. 9.

On Dec. 3, she will receive the prestigious 2012 Dance Magazine Award, which honors artists who have made major contributions to the field.

For more information, visit www.alvinaiiley.org.



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Renee Robinson and Glenn Allen Sims. Inset: Renee Robinson. (Andrew Eccles photo)