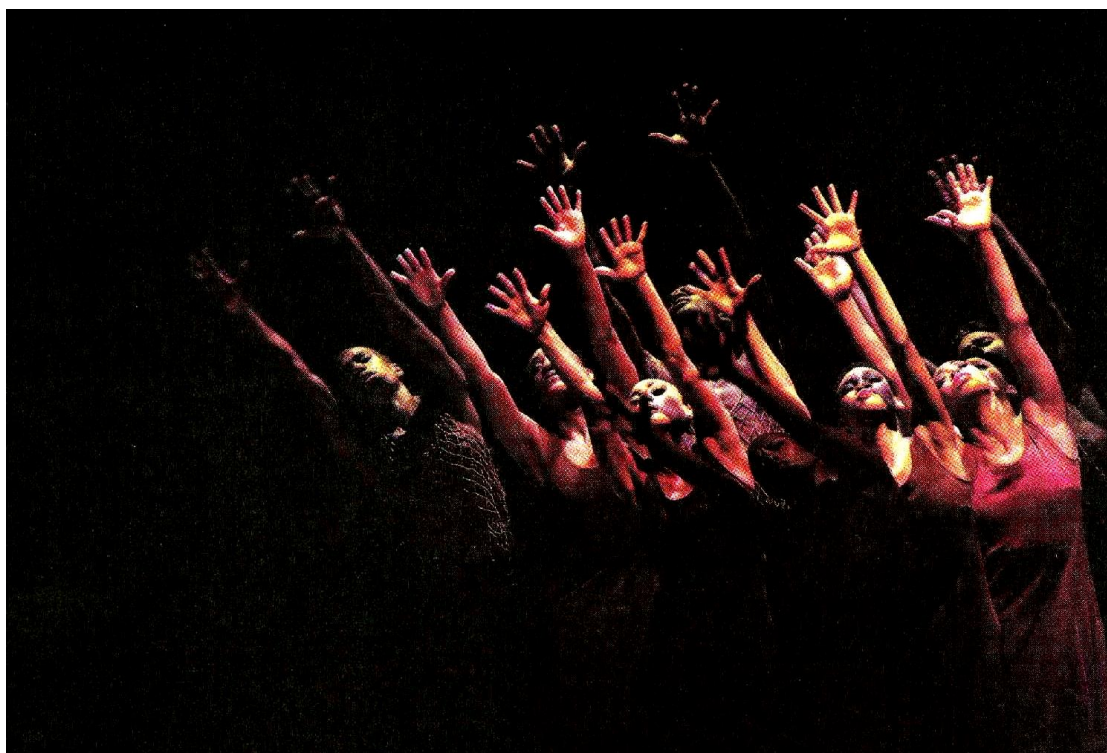


# The Washington Post

## Style

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SUSAN BIDDLE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

**PRAISEWORTHY:** Dancers with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater perform at the Kennedy Center in 2011. The group will hold a fundraising gala Tuesday and a six-day run there this week. ■ For video of the world's most elite African American dance troupe, go to [washingtonpost.com/lifestyle](http://washingtonpost.com/lifestyle).

## A strong dance partner

Alvin Ailey's dance troupe gets much support from the District, which hosts a major fundraising gala so patrons can give a hand and shake a leg

BY REBECCA RITZEL

If there's a gala in Washington with a livelier dance floor than the annual Alvin Ailey after-party, Debra Lee doesn't know of it. On Tuesday, Lee, president of Black Entertainment Television, will host her 11th gala to support Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the world's most elite African American troupe. After an Opera House performance and a dinner of beet salad and salmon filets at the Kennedy Center's Roof Terrace, patrons will have an opportunity to cut a parquet floor with the company's dancers.

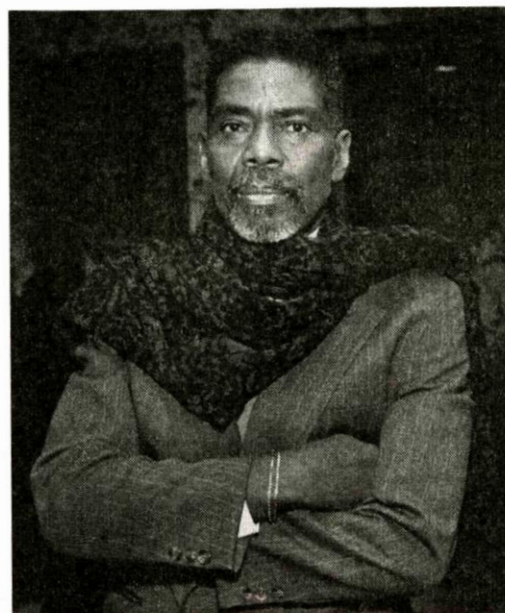
Or the patrons can just sit back and think: "If I hadn't shelled out \$1,000 to be here tonight, that dancer might not be here either."

Raising money wasn't always a glamorous business for Alvin Ailey. The late African American choreographer changed modern dance when he founded

his troupe in 1958, but the company nearly folded several times in its 55-year history. Now the company is among the most financially solvent troupes in the country, bolstered by corporate sponsors and three major galas: one at Manhattan's City Center, one at Harlem's Apollo Theater and, since 1999, one at the Kennedy Center.

Organizers say Tuesday's event will raise \$700,000 for the company, a percentage of which will provide scholarships for a dozen D.C. area youth to attend the Ailey School in New York. The money also underwrites the company's annual six-day run at the Kennedy Center — which this year runs Tuesday through Sunday and allows the dancers to offer free master classes while they are in town.

"It's a party with a purpose," said Chinyere Hubbard, a communications execu-



MARGARET THOMAS/THE WASHINGTON POST

**THE ICON:** Alvin Ailey, seen in 1988, founded his troupe in 1958 and changed modern dance. The group is bolstered by sponsors and three major galas.

GALA CONTINUED ON C9



# District gets footloose and fancy for Ailey dance gala

GALA FROM C1

tive. "That's a cliché, but it really is true. There isn't another event in D.C. quite like it."

Hubbard and her husband will be attending for the fifth straight year. They go not only because they are longtime supporters of the company but because in February in Washington, the Ailey gala is the place to be.

"It really is the event that kicks off the social season, especially for African Americans," she said. "There's an important fundraising goal and a very special performance."

This year, the troupe comes with two Washington natives, Ghrai DeVore and Jermaine Terry, who received Ailey School scholarships thanks to gala funding. Of the company's 29 remaining dancers, four — including soon-to-retire matriarch Renee Robinson — are from the District, Maryland or Virginia and have received some sort of scholarship from the company. Add leggy star Alicia Graf Mack, who grew up in Columbia, and it's a performance that's a homecoming for many Ailey dancers.

"There are such strong support roots for Ailey in D.C., it is the perfect place for a fundraising gala," said Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell, a former Ailey dancer who has powerful memories of performing at the Kennedy Center during her 13-year tenure. Washington is the only city that Ailey has toured to annually for the past 20 years.

From 1968 through 2005, the Washington Performing Arts Society presented the company 35 times, with the Kennedy Center taking over in 2006. Douglas Wheeler, a former WPAS president, said it wasn't easy in those early years to attract black audiences to Ailey performances, and it wasn't until the National Endowment for Arts began funding residencies that WPAS was able to send company members to places such as Howard University. Those residencies, Wheeler said, allowed WPAS to cultivate African American fans in the District.

Nowadays, there's no question that Ailey brings a diverse crowd to the Opera House. President Obama attended in 2009, just after his first inauguration. Judith Jamison, Ailey's former artistic director, used to call appearances at the Kennedy Center performing "in-

side America's jewelry box." Fisher-Harrell compared stepping out on the vast stage to heading out on the town and "slipping on your very best pair of shoes."

Although she made guest appearances onstage as recently as 2011, Fisher-Harrell will be a spectator this year, and she is especially excited to cheer on Baltimore School for the Arts graduate Jacqueline Green, who joined Ailey in 2011. Fisher-Harrell also plans to get pretty dressed up for the occasion.

"This is not a game," she said. "People come dressed to kill. Black ties. Sequins. Beads. Gowns. The whole gamut."

*"It's a party with a purpose. That's a cliché, but it really is true. There isn't another event in D.C. quite like it."*

Chinyere Hubbard, a communications executive

Technically, the gala is black-tie optional, said Lee, the BET president. "There's a little bit of everything, but it is one of the best-dressed events out there. People try to be more creative and more festive."

The lighting and decor, while designed on a budget, attempt to keep up with the guests' appearances. This year, the tables will be decked out in mauve-and-navy tablecloths and flower arrangements of calla lilies, roses and peonies. Sitting at those tables will be a well-dressed, motley mix of arts activists, legislators, corporate executives and lobbyists. This year's VIP list includes six members of Congress, the French ambassador and media personalities.

"It is one of the most well-attended events in Washington for congressional folks and administration officials," Lee said. "They often lend their names to events. This one they actually come, too."

Companies that sponsored tables last year include Wal-Mart, DHL and Northrop Grumman. If those don't sound like the usual suspects when it comes to corporate arts supporters,



REBECCA D'ANGELO FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

**IN CHARGE:** Debra Lee, president of Black Entertainment Television and co-chair of this year's gala, is seen in 2012 with Lyndon K. Boozer of AT&T.

that's intentional. The gala has been growing each year, and the committee, which includes Washington Post Publisher Katharine Weymouth, prides itself on recruiting new sponsors.

"A lot of times, people who come to the gala have never seen the company," Lee said.

It may seem counterintuitive: Shouldn't an arts organization be selling its art, not a salmon dinner? Kennedy Center President Michael Kaiser, who ran Ailey from 1991 to 1993, said the company's model is "not 100 percent unusual in arts fundraising. Many times, people who first get associated with an organization come to a gala because it is a social event. Then they realize that they also enjoy the performance and get more involved."

It's a fundraising model that doesn't seem practical or even palatable to some artists. Ronald K. Brown is the director of Evidence, an Afro-centric dance company that WPAS began bringing to Washington when the Kennedy Center took over presenting Ailey. "We had to find our own system, not the Ailey model," Brown said. "I need people to believe in my work to really support it, and not just be connected to other friends that do."

Brown's company performed Saturday at George Washington University's Lisner Auditorium to a not-quite-full but ardent crowd, which burst out in applause when he came onstage midway

through the show.

But Ailey will draw the bigger crowds. And Brown has a friend at Ailey who believes in his work: artistic director Robert Battle, who took over when Jamison stepped down in 2011. The Kennedy Center performances will include Brown's "Grace," a spiritually inflected work he set on the company in 1999, and which Battle has revived.

This week's Ailey repertory is possibly the most diverse that the company has ever brought to the Kennedy Center. All four programs will close with "Revelations," Ailey's famed 53-year-old suite set to black spirituals. In addition to "Grace," the dancers will perform works including a classic by American icon Paul Taylor, an Israeli crowd-pleaser by Ohad Naharin, an orgasm-inspired ballet by Czech choreographer Jiri Kylian and a new tribute to Dizzy Gillespie from the young American Kyle Abraham.

Lee remains confident that even if first-time gala attendees aren't coming because they are fans of Czech contemporary dance, they will leave as new fans of Ailey.

"By the time they've seen them, they will feel like dancing," she said. "And we will give them the opportunity to do that. We will go upstairs, we will have the dinner and we will dance until the middle of the night."

style@washpost.com

Ritzel is a freelance writer.