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Linda Celeste Sims: Ailey's joyful spirit in the flesh



AAADT's Linda Celeste Sims in Alvin Ailey's "Cry."



(James R. Brantley photo)

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Alvin Ailey's "Revelations."



AAADT in Robert Battle's "Mass."

(Paul Kolnik photos)

By ZITA ALLEN
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Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater dancer Linda Celeste Sims is so down to Earth it's easy to forget the tape recorder, the pre-determined questions and the fact that the conversation is really an interview as we hop from topic to topic. Talking with her about dance is as easy as watching her perform Ronald K. Brown's prayerful "Grace," Alvin Ailey's soulful "Cry," the transcendent tribute "Memoria" or the timeless masterpiece "Revelations." Her spirits shines through.

The same is true as she talks about being in the Ailey Company sharing the stage with a company of exquisite dancers, one of whom is her husband, Glenn Allen Sims, as they perform works such as this season's line-up of Robert Battle's "Mass," Talley Beatty's "Stack-Up," Jamar Roberts' premiere "Members Don't Get Weary," or Gustavo Ramirez Sansano's "Victoria" and, of course, "Revelations," among others. Clearly, it's a labor of love. The vivacious, expressive Sims is a star but she's clearly still a home girl from the Bronx, the daughter of a Nicaraguan mother and Dominican father, a descendant of a long line of women who worked as maids and housekeepers but were warriors and gladiators. And, whether Sims is actually dancing or talking about it that spirit shines through.

"You know, my thing has always been, I don't focus on how high my leg is," Sims said. "I'm enjoying every piece, everything that's been given to me. Whenever I'm dancing, I'm happy. It brings me that much joy." She squeezed that last word, relishing the images it conjures up.

Whether it's a dance being performed for the first time or something she's done

a gazillion times, such as her spellbinding performance in the "Fix Me, Jesus" section of "Revelations," she said, "Each time I approach it with a different mindset. You know, I want to feel like I'm this vulnerable person and I'm being just lifted by Jesus. I know it sounds a little crazy but, you know, sometimes you have to talk to yourself, bring stories to yourself in order to bring it to life."

Watching her perform, it's easy to assume she was born with a facility many dancers work so hard for—one fluid yet forceful, supple yet strong; one that moves through space as if swimming under water and unfurls as if music flows through her veins. She's quick to point out it's the result of years of hard work. "Like, OK when I was younger I wished I had bangin' feet and hyperextended legs," she said, "But, you know what I said to myself when I was in the studio? I don't have that, but what can I have that she can't have? And I said, 'Well I'm gonna twirl, I'm gonna dance.' Whatever that meant for me. You know I might not have all of that, but what can I do? Oh, I can use my eyes and bring you in with my spirit."

Teaching master classes, Sims likes to share insights with aspiring dancers because, invariably there will be that little girl or little boy who doesn't have that perfect body "but, my God, they are throwing themselves into the movement and they dance!"

"She declared, 'I would rather pay to see someone give it their all than someone with beautiful neck, beautiful arms, perfect placement and not giving it.' Her advice is simple, 'Keep pushing the boundaries.' And, work. Hard.

That's what she has done and because she loves dance so much, it's a labor of

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love, especially because she gets to share it with her husband.

"If I was to call him a name, it would be prince or royalty," she said. "He carries himself that way, and he's always on the lookout to make sure I'm OK. Don't get me wrong, we do some bickering but when we're together onstage, 99 percent of the times I can close my eyes and just dance because I know he'll feel my movement." There's also a camaraderie with other Ailey dancers. In fact, there are times, Sims said, when the joy of dancing in the Ailey company is so palpable, "We're having a party onstage!"

That joy of dancing has been with her from the days her grandmother took her to her first dance classes at Ballet Hispanico. It compelled her to work harder when, after a recital, her grandmother would tell her, "Linda, don't look at the girl next to you. Be you! Stand out!" It was there all through her years at LaGuardia High School of the Performing Arts, putting in the hard work that has, unexpectedly, resulted in recognition, such as the 2014 New York Dance and Performance Awards (the Besies), a picture on the cover of Dance Magazine, guest performances on the TV shows such as "So You Think You Can Dance," and "Dancing with the Stars." There have even been guest appearances at the White House Dance Series, Youth America Grand Prix, Vail International Dance Festival and galas in Budapest and Vienna.

"I never thought I would win those things," Sims said. It's clear that she's doing it for love not recognition. Describing her love for Ailey's "Cry," Sims talks about the women in her family. "I come from a background of many very strong women," she said. "Most

of them were maids and housekeepers. They lived past 100. I feel I get power from them. They're warriors. They're the ones that can take it. They've been through so much, yet nothing stops them."

She recalled attending an Ailey gala in a Hilton Hotel ballroom and being near tears when it hits her that it was the same hotel where her grandmother used to clean the toilets in the guests' rooms upstairs. "Now, people pay to come to see me dance are sitting here," she said. "I'm very emotional. I'm a Latina. Probably the first one ever to do 'Cry,' and I don't think I'll ever do it better than Judith Jamison or

Donna Wood. They are all perfect. I'm a little Spanish girl and they are Amazons. I don't claim that I've done it better but I claim that I enjoy it very much!"

Since joining the Ailey Company in 1996 after a friend dragged her to an audition and she was chosen from among the 144 dancers there, that joy has been seen by audiences who've loved her thrilling performances. Next month, when Ailey Artistic Director Emerita Judith Jamison presents Sims with the coveted Dance Magazine Award and during the Ailey season (Nov. 29-Dec. 31), there will be more than enough joy to go around.