

An Ailey Favorite Returns to the Fold

Clifton Brown talks about working for other companies and how those stints have changed him for the better.

By MARINA HARSS

Onstage, Clifton Brown is a force: a dancer with enormous presence, a strong theatricality and a large-scale, lush physicality. His long, graceful arms seem to embrace the world, and he has a way of tilting his face upward so it catches the light, giving him the air of someone illuminated by thought.

These qualities made him a favorite at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, which he joined in 1999 at 19, and left in 2011.

"Ailey is kind of an island," he explained on a recent morning, "and I'd never had the opportunity to see what the outside world was like." He went on to dance for the modern-dance choreographer Lar Lubovitch, and then, more lastingly, for Jessica Lang, a contemporary dancemaker who was in the process of putting together an ensemble. He stayed with Ms. Lang for six years, becoming her rehearsal director.

But now he is returning to the Ailey fold. I caught up with him at the company's studios; he had been back only two weeks and was preparing for the troupe's Lincoln Center run, which opens on Wednesday. He looked focused, and a little tired.

At Lincoln Center, he'll be easing back into old roles in Ailey's signature work, "Revelations": the arduous solo "I Wanna Be Ready," the high-energy trio "Sinner Man," and the prayerful duet "Fix Me, Je-

sus." Then, during the company's coming tour, he'll take on more repertory, including Christopher Wheeldon's pas de deux "After the Rain."

In conversation, Mr. Brown is as soft-spoken and introspective as he is imposing on the stage. These are edited excerpts from our discussion.

Is "Revelations" still in your bones?

I don't think I could forget it even if I wanted to. In a way, it's like riding a bike, but I have a new perspective on it as well. You realize a lot of things you thought were so important are really not so important.

Like what?

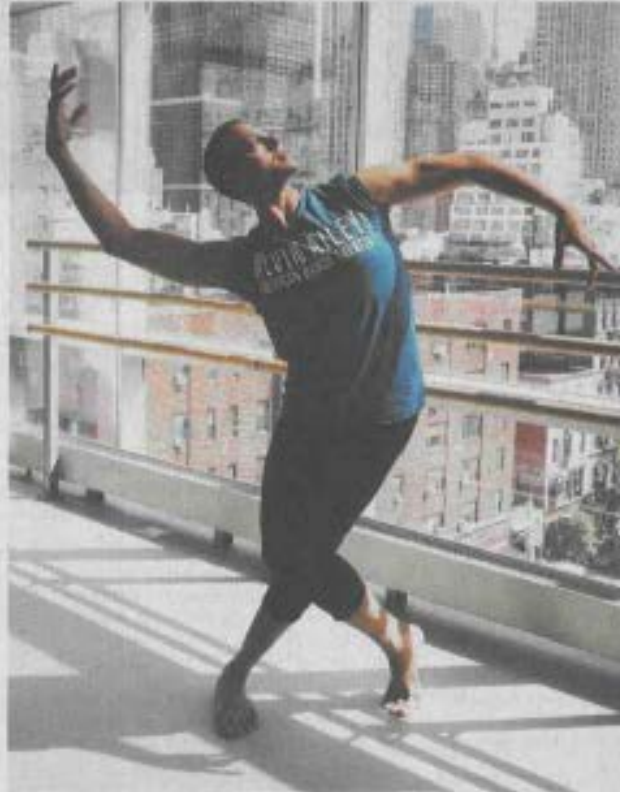
Like in "I Wanna Be Ready," the way it looks, the picture, is important, but it's also a means to an end. Each time you rise up a little bit further, and each time there is a giving up or a defeat. You have to find out how to get there, to have an internal reason. I have a little more insight into the reasons behind it because I've had time to think about the architecture of it.

How did the time away change you as a dancer?

I feel that I have more understanding of the importance of the work from the side of the choreographers. Being a dancer in a rep company, you're always trying to do your best on each program, but it's hard to get the specific intention for each piece and each style. But I feel like I have a different kind of approach now.

What drew you to dance for Jessica Lang?

Her movement style changes from piece to



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Clifton Brown rehearsing. "I have a different kind of approach now," he said.

piece, which is good, especially for a choreographer whose work you're doing all the time. And her movement feels good; it's beautiful but it's simple. It has simplicity combined with richness. And from the outside, it's stunning to look at.

How about Mr. Lubovitch — what do you like about his style?

His movement is so organic and so fluid; I actually feel like that's close to my natural movement quality in general. In working with Ailey, I learned to have more attack and more staccato.

Why did you decide to return to Ailey now?

When I left Ailey, I was hoping to experience other things, but not leave forever. So this just felt like the right time to do it. I wanted to see what it's like, with largely a different group of dancers and a new director [Robert Battle], now that the company is taking this slightly different direction. It's kind of a familiar, but also a new, experience.

So, what's it like to dance "Sinner Man" at 37?

[Laughs.] It's a great quick-twitch muscle workout, like being shot out of a cannon. It takes anticipation. You have to be ready. It's about conjuring up the feeling of Judgment Day, so you've got to run. And then at the end, you're just really out of breath.