Ailey Dancer Honors His Roots

Jamar Roberts is loyal to his longtime Miami mentor.

By JORDAN LEVIN

MIAMI — Jamar Roberts has been around the world as a leading dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. But a week after Hurricane Irma swept through Miami, he was back where he started, at Dance Empire, a studio in a suburban strip of warehouses here.

Life was mostly back to normal in Miami, with towering piles of debris lining the streets the chief remaining sign of the storm. Inside the studio, attention was focused on Mr. Roberts, who was rehearsing a group of young dancers in a piece that hinted at his difficult past. He demonstrated a sequence that veered between wild, flinging movement and tense, pulsing quiet.

"There's this feeling of loss," he said, his torso buckling. "You're losing ground."

From a corner, Angel Fraser-Logan, Empire's owner and artistic director, looked on approvingly.

"My favorite place is watching him create."

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Jamar Roberts of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater leading a rehearsal in Miami at Dance Empire, where he studied in his youth. He is working on a project in his hometown.

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ANGEL FRASER-LOGAN

DANCE AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF DANCE EMPIRE IN MIAMI ON A TEENAGER JAMAR ROBERTS
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on my dancers," she said.

Ms. Fraser-Logan, 42, has been watching Mr. Roberts, 35, for two decades. As a
teacher and a mentor, she helped him sur-
mount a troubled home life and grow from
an introverted boy who barely spoke to a
world-class dancer.

"She made me feel safe to express the
things I wanted to express," Mr. Roberts
said, "without feeling like they were wrong,
that I was wrong for wanting to dance or
choreograph."

In turn, he became part of her family,
godfather to her children and an inspiration
to students at Empire, where he has
returned regularly to teach and choreograph
since he left Miami for Alvin Ailey, in New

Mr. Roberts, at 6-foot-4, towers over Ms.
Fraser-Logan ("I'm 5 foot nothing"). As
his reserved demeanor contrasts with her
animated one. But they remain tightly
bound, and are collaborating on an
ambitious project highlighting Mr. Roberts'
roots here, a program of his choreography
called "The House of the Most Loved,"
scheduled to show at the Olympia Theater
downtown Miami in January.

Mr. Roberts spent a week in mid-Septem-
ber rehearsing with Empire students and
will add other young dancers from the area.
He will travel from New York to work on
the show, even as he prepares his first
piece for the Alvin Ailey, "Members Don't
Get Weary," set to have its premiere on Dec.
8 during the company's season at New York
City Center.

After the Empire rehearsal, Mr. Roberts
joined Ms. Fraser-Logan and her daughter
Brooke, 23, at their house, where he stays
when in Miami. They sat in the kitchen, eat-
ing leftovers, telling stories about his
teenage appetite; his wariness of her dogs
("where I came from dogs bite you," he
said); how he dressed up as a cartoon char-
acter for Carter, Ms. Fraser-Logan's 7-year-
old son; and how he coaxed Brooke through
adolescence. (She will be his choreographic
assistant for the Alvin Ailey piece in New York.)

Close as they are now, Mr. Roberts and
Ms. Fraser-Logan come from different
backgrounds. Mr. Roberts and his two
brothers grew up in Goulds, a poor neigh-
borhood he described as regularly torn by
gunfire and drug busts. His family moved
often, living with relatives when they could-
not afford their own home. After Hurricane
Andrew destroyed their house in 1992, he
said his parents' drug use made his family's
already chaotic home life untenable.

"We just got poorer and poorer," Mr. Rob-
erts said. "Nights were really dark and
heavy."

He found an escape in sixth grade, when
he was transfixed by a dance performance
at his school holiday show: girls in sparkly
purple dresses whirling to a syrupy Disney
tune.

"My whole world changed," he said,
laughing. "They were spinning and twirl-
ing, and I was like, 'I have to do that.' I was
just drawn to the beauty of it."

His life stabilized when he and his broth-
ers moved in with his grandmother.

He transferred to an arts magnet middle
school with a strong dance program. He
borrowed classical music tapes so he could
make up dances at home, and drew baller-
nas to give to the program's director. But
he said he remained so withdrawn that he
rarely talked.

Ms. Fraser-Logan, by contrast, grew up
in a middle-class family in Palmetto Bay.

She trained at the New World School of
the Arts, the Miami conservatory whose gradu-
ates include Robert Battle, artistic director
of the Alvin Ailey company. Instead of a career
as a dancer, Ms. Fraser-Logan, who married at
20 and had children, turned to teaching. She
was struck by Mr. Roberts, a towering ninth
grader when she spotted him in the back of
a modern dance class she taught at a local
arts high school.

"He had a chipped front tooth and jumped
so high he almost hit the ceiling," she said.
Impressed, and thinking he might be an
ideal scholarship student at her new studio,
she offered to buy him a bus pass.

For his part, Mr. Roberts said he was mes-
merized by the barefoot, uninhibited Ms.
Fraser-Logan: "I had never seen a teacher
like that, so expressive and open.

So he showed up at her studio. "He couldn't
control how he was spinning, couldn't
stop," she said. "But it was more graceful,
with more ability than I'd ever seen."

After that first class she told him: "You
don't need to take the bus. I'll drive you
home."

Jamar Roberts, top, is balancing his career
as a dancer and choreographer for the
Alvin Ailey company with teaching young
artists in his hometown, at Dance Empire
in Miami, above.

Ms. Fraser-Logan became an advocate
for Mr. Roberts. Through high school, she
drove him home at night, paid for competi-
tions, got his teeth fixed and used his draw-
ings for program covers. She took him to an
Alvin Ailey performance and told him, "That
could be you," if he went to the New World
school. Mr. Roberts's grandmother was
opposed at first, distrustful of Mr. Roberts'
growing involvement with a world that
seemed alien to her.

"She was not having it," Mr. Roberts said.
"She was like, 'Why do you have to go to
those white people's school when you can
just go to the school right here, Homestead
High, where the black kids are?' She
had a lot of anxiety around raising these
young boys when young boys here in Miami
are so vulnerable."

Mr. Roberts said that his confidence grew
with Ms. Fraser-Logan's attention. Their rel-
nationship was sealed when he unexpect-
edly showed up at her home one morning.

"He said, 'I don't know what to do with my
life, don't have a mom, don't have some-
one who's going to be there for me,'" Ms.
Fraser-Logan recalled. Too much
older than he was, she promised to play that
role for him.

The veteran New World teacher Peter
London was also instrumental in making
Mr. Roberts a strikingly powerful, eloquent
dancer who has become central to the Ally-
troupe. (A recent review in The New York
Times referred to his "gargantuan ele-
genuee and "full-bodied commitment.
"

But it was Ms. Fraser-Logan, Mr. Roberts
said, who "taught me how to be an artist
-the importance of dance being a form of
expression and not just a physical act you do
when music is on."

Now it's his turn to mentor the next gen-
eration. The group that Mr. Roberts re-
hearsed at Empire included the daughter of
his middle-school dance director and a girl
he is coaching who won a scholarship to the
Alley school last summer.

"That freedom and openness and expres-
sion I was taught by Angel," Mr. Roberts
said. "Once you tap into that way, noth-
ing else does it for you."