



Still Dancing with Alvin Ailey After 21 Years

By: Susan Reiter

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Although it's exciting when a young new dancer catches your eye for the first time, it's even more thrilling to watch that performer mature artistically over the years. These days, many leading New York companies are enriched by veteran members who've been dancing for decades, such as American Ballet Theatre's Stella Abrera and Gillian Murphy, Paul Taylor Dance Company's Michael Trusnovac, New York City Ballet's Maria Kowroski and Mark Morris Dance Group's Lauren Grant, who's reprising her role as the heroine of *The Hard Nut* at BAM this month.



Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, which is celebrating its 60th anniversary at New York City Center this December, also boasts two spectacularly seasoned performers: Glenn Allen Sims and Vernard J. Gilmore. Both joined the company in 1997 and cite Ailey's constantly evolving repertory as what keeps them feeling engaged, challenged and vital.

"When dancers are training as students, they're getting all these styles and techniques," Sims says. "To have that accessible as a professional in one location is a rare treat. You never know what's going to come in. Whoever the choreographer is, whatever the style, I always ask myself, 'How can I push myself? How can I change my mindset?' I'm learning something new, another layer to what I can offer. So it's been a great experience of trying different dance styles with each season."

While the repertory now includes choreography that the late Alvin Ailey could never have imagined, that diversity is intrinsic to his vision. "He was very interested in different styles," says Gilmore. "That was his foundation. He wanted the company dancers to be virtuosos, ready to soak anything up. I love that and think it's one of the special things about this company."

For Sims, whose early training was primarily in classical ballet, the company's commissions of contemporary hip-hop pieces have helped expand his range. This month, he's scheduled to dance in the world premiere of one such work, Rennie Harris' two-part *Lazarus*, inspired by Alvin Ailey's life and legacy. "I'm doing Rennie's fast footwork -- years ago I wouldn't have been able to do that," Sims says. "But I now have a platform of hip-hop knowledge because of the earlier pieces he's choreographed for us."

Ailey's own oeuvre -- especially the timeless and universally admired *Revelations* -- anchors the repertory, and this anniversary season offers a generous sampling of his choreography. Even for these longtime performers, dancing the founder's steps never gets old.

"Mr. Ailey's works are always a chance to explore your humanity and who you want to be," Gilmore says. "They are my foundation. Even though I perform *Revelations* all the time, each time you're out there is new. It's really amazing how it connects everyone and how it moves people. That's what is always so enduring for me."

In addition to tackling such a wide array of styles, both men say the chance to mentor up-and-coming dancers keeps them on their toes. "I've always nurtured and taken people under my wing," says Sims, who's married to fellow company member Linda Celeste Sims. "I had that when I joined the company, dancers who were like my big brothers, people who were around when Mr. Ailey was alive. They shared their knowledge with me. Now I get encouraged by the younger dancers in the company -- their dedication to the art form and to the work. My coworkers definitely motivate me to keep pushing, to stay alongside them."



Gilmore agrees. "I try to always be an example when I'm working," he says. "I take pride in the work, in the tradition of Mr. Ailey. I try to pass on what was given to me. That's an important thing about the legacy, to continue to share what you know about Ailey and this incredible place that he dreamed of. It became this instrument that reaches in all these different places to help us find ourselves, and reminds us of who we are and what we're about."