

'Keeper of Flame' – G'Bye

By: Karu F. Daniels

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Alvin Ailey's Chaya ends 48-year run

BY KARU F. DANIELS
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After 48 years with the celebrated Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, both as performer and choreographer, Masazumi Chaya is hanging up his dancing shoes.

The Japanese-American artist will start the new year by retiring as the modern dance company's artistic director.

But the man known as "The Keeper of the Flame" to some colleagues is working until his very last day with the renowned dance troupe, whose members will celebrate his legacy with a special evening of performances on Sunday at New York's City Center. He got his nickname for preserving the New York City-based company's repertoire and for training generations of dancers through the past three decades.

"I love these dancers and I want to be with them as much I can because when January comes in, they go off and then start the national tour," he told the Daily News this week. "I had to see them before they go. They're my kids, my brothers and sisters, so I enjoy being around."

Chaya started his classical ballet career in his native Fukuoka, Japan, and moved to New York in 1970, when he also began to train in modern dance at the Richard Englund Repertory Company.

His first audition for the Alvin Ailey company two years later came about by luck.

Chaya, who had just performed in a disco concert that earned him a positive review in *The New York Times*, showed up at tryouts to serve as a translator for another dancer who was auditioning.

When Ailey's general manager Ivy



Masazumi Chaya (right and below) is shown in 1980 with Alvin Ailey and fellow dancer Marilyn Banks.



performed for an estimated 25 million people in 71 countries on six continents — as well as millions more through TV broadcasts, films and digital platforms. It is recognized for promoting the African-American cultural experience and the preservation and enrichment of the American modern dance tradition.

Chaya performed as a dancer for Alvin Ailey for 15 years and in 1988, became the company's rehearsal director. Since 1991, he has served as the company's associate artistic director, working closely with Jamison, who became the face of the organization after Ailey died in 1989.

It was Chaya who played an integral part in bringing Jamison — Ailey's muse, who he discovered in 1964 — back after her departure in 1988 to start her own company, The Jamison Project.

Jamison retired from her post as artistic director in 2010 but remains close to Chaya. He says the dance icon, who he sometimes calls "mom," texts him regularly to see how the shows are going — and also makes a "mean strawberry daiquiri" when he visits her Upper West Side apartment.

His official last day as associate artistic director will come when Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's five-week annual residency culminates Jan. 5 at City Center.

But he will oversee a licensing project that will assist in the restaging of Ailey's works — of which he has become a master.

Chaya said it will be a digital hub with tools for other institutions who want to officially adapt Ailey's vast repertoire.

"I'd like to open up for anybody to approach us... because his work is so beautiful," said Chaya. "It's for the world to embrace."

Clarke realized Chaya was the same dancer in *The Times* review she fortuitously had sitting on her desk, she asked him and his friend to return for a callback the next day.

"At the time, the company was performing at the Metropolitan Opera House for [Leonard] Bernstein's *Mass* and Judith Jamison and all the other company members were dancing during the audition that day," he recalled. "Mr. Ailey was just looking at us and then took us the upstairs room and then said, 'Oh, we'd like to give you a contract.'"

Founded in New York City in 1958, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has