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That Goddess Quality? This Ailey Dancer's Got It

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Jacqueline Green was a shy 13-year-old when her mother, considering possible schools in Baltimore, observed two qualities that her daughter possessed.

“You’re the artsy child,” Ms. Green recalled her saying. “You’re flexible.”

Soon after, Ms. Green found herself at a dance audition for Baltimore School for the Arts. It was not only her first audition, it was also her first ballet class. “I had on Payless tights and shoes, and I don’t know where we found a leotard,” Ms. Green said. “I had my hair slicked back in this bun and I thought: ‘People actually do this? Holding your arms out is tiring.’”

But then there was the flexibility test. As she put it, “I was like, oh, I’ve got this — I watch TV in this position.”

She was accepted. That Ms. Green, now a supremely elegant member of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, began training so late is remarkable, but her facility is as natural as her poise. Regal and soft-spoken, she has delicate, feline bone structure and willowy limbs — she’s 5-foot-9 — which adds to her unaffected elegance. She can be soft, she can be unyielding, but her intensity radiates across the stage, pulling your gaze like a magnet.

During the company’s annual City Center season, Ms. Green has intensified that pull with a new level of confidence, blossoming in new and classic works. Playing a witness figure, she was a standout in Donald Byrd’s “Greenwood,” a premiere about the Tulsa massacre of 1921. “I loved her in ‘Greenwood,’” said Judith Jamison, Ailey’s artistic director emerita. “That she held that stage that long?”

“She was like a bulwark,” Ms. Jamison added. “She was like the ship.”

It has also been revealing to see Ms. Green in older works like “Memoria,” which Ailey choreographed after the death of a friend. Moving from a place of sorrow to one of joy, Ms. Green was almost a spirit — ethereal and stately — as she floated inside Keith Jarrett’s shimmering score.

“She really seems to be in command of her instrument in a way that she hit another level,” Robert Battle, the company’s artistic director, said. “It’s like when someone plays a wind instrument and takes it to a place where there’s just enough air to be in hearing range without shouting each note.”

Ms. Green, who turns 30 the day after Christmas, was part of a group of nine dancers who Mr. Battle hired when he became artistic director in 2011. At the time she was a member of the second company, Ailey II.

“Everything around that audition was intense,” she said. “I felt excited, but New York can be a big distraction and be a bit overwhelming, and there was everyone saying, ‘Oh, you could get the job, you’re going to do this, I can so see you there.’ I’m an introvert in an extrovert world, and I just need quiet.”



So she decamped for a few days to Chicago, where her best friend, Preston Miller — now her fiancé — lived. “I was like, ‘O.K. It’s calmer there, I’ll be around family,’” she said. “So I just went, took class, relaxed. I ate. I did what I needed to do.”

When she returned to New York, she was ready for the audition — and, of course, got in. But Mr. Battle said he knew he wanted her for the main company even before she auditioned. She had impressed him in an Ailey II performance of “Shards,” another work by Mr. Byrd.

“To me, she represents what survives our ancestors,” he said. “She has that goddess, queenly quality just in her cheekbones. There’s something about her that feels like something from the past — like the strength and the survival of so many strong black women that came before.”



Ms. Green was introduced to the company while still at Baltimore School for the Arts; Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell, then an Ailey dancer — and a ravishing one at that — had also trained there and took a class with the students. “I still remember exactly what she did,” Ms. Green said. It was an exercise at the barre in which the extended leg folded until the foot reached the knee.

Ms. Green was blown away by Ms. Fisher-Harrell’s beauty, and remembers thinking: “Oh, my God, this is what they’re trying to get us to do. And she looks like me. She was a black woman and she was from Baltimore and she sounded like me, and I was like, wait — she gets paid to travel and dance and who does she work for?”

With Ms. Fisher-Harrell’s encouragement, Ms. Green made her way to the company, first through the Ailey/Fordham B.F.A. program and then at Ailey II. Ms. Jamison said Ms. Green is “one of my absolutely favorite-favorite dancers, and sometimes I don’t know if she even knows how gorgeous she is.”

Her earliest impression of Ms. Green? “All legs and arms and with a future,” Ms. Jamison said. “It wasn’t all coordinated yet, but it was still stunning and memorable when you saw her come onstage. All the parts have to come together, and it takes time.”

When Ms. Green joined the main company, the new dancers had two weeks to learn material for a 12-week tour. “I remember going to the locker room and sitting down at the end of the day and thinking, ‘What did I get myself into?’ I’m really overwhelmed. I’m really sad because I feel overwhelmed. You have those moments where you feel like, am I even a good dancer? Why did they hire me?”

It got better. She learned how to rehearse and how the company works. “The scheduling and the rules and the contracts — it’s really like you need a course,” she said.

As Ms. Green relies more on her instincts, her dancing has become more authoritative. “I’ve learned to trust myself,” she said. “I’ve lived more.”

When she was working on a solo in “Greenwood,” Mr. Byrd told her to go into a studio and create, she said, “moments of joy, pleading and hallelujah Holy Ghost.”

At first she was hesitant, but then she directed herself to simply figure out what felt good. “Slowly it morphed into something kind of overwhelming,” Ms. Green said. “Do you know how you can get tingly? I remember not wanting to come out of the solo because it felt so good. So to lose control, to let it happen is new for me.”

But when she's not being genuine? It feels like work. Now, though, "it's a lot easier to let go," she said. "It takes some courage and bravery to do that, and maybe because of my seniority in the company I feel I'm getting that more and more. If I'm going to be a role model I just have to be completely who I am. I do feel different. Going on instinct is a big thing this year."

As the season winds down, she's most looking forward to performing in the all-female cast of Jamar Roberts's "Ode," a powerful and poetic exploration of the effects of gun violence, on Dec. 29 and Jan. 1. (The dance is also performed with an all-male cast.)

"There was a period of time when there was a whole bunch of police targeting black people and we still had to come in and perform," she said. "One day, it was like the fifth person in two weeks and everybody was crying. People had on sunglasses trying to cover it up. I knew I still had to do my job, but my heart wasn't connected to it because I was torn as a person. I saw people that looked like me. It was like it had happened to me."

And it felt close to home. Sandra Bland, arrested on a traffic violation in Texas and later found hanging in her cell, was a childhood friend of Ms. Green's fiancé.

Mr. Roberts's "Ode" is more than just a dance.

"It's beyond steps," Ms. Green said, "which all dance should be. I feel like I might be crying by the end. We have to let out years of our frustrations. That's what this dance calls for."