



## Dancer who left New Orleans at 13 finally gets to perform in his hometown -- with Alvin Ailey

By: Lauren Testino

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On Saturday evening (March 23), the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will dance a dance about circles. It's a dance about time, and evolution, and what changes and, of course, what stays the same. It's about destiny and journeys and how fate makes all of those things flop on top of each other in a precise but messy Venn diagram.

As the lead dancer in "EN," New Orleans-born Michael Jackson, Jr. will be performing right in the center.

"I'm just so excited to perform it ("EN") at home," Jackson said, because he knows how excitable and loving New Orleanians are. "Some of them (Ailey company members) know, but they don't really know, you know?"

"EN" marks the 100th work for choreographer Jessica Lang, a friend of Ailey's Artistic Director Robert Battle. It will be the closing performance on the Mahalia Jackson stage during milestone years for both the Ailey company, in its 60th year, and the New Orleans Ballet Association, celebrating its 50th.

Ailey's return to New Orleans has been in the works with NOBA for the past decade. NOBA last brought the company to New Orleans in 2010. Prior to that, NOBA brought the company to New Orleans in 2001 and, in April 2005, it was the last company to perform in NOBA's series before Hurricane Katrina.

For Jackson, who moved to Washington, D.C. when he was 13, the Friday (March 22) and Saturday (March 23) night performances will be his first dance performances in his hometown. He grew up on Banks Street in Mid-City loving to sing, all the time, and thinking he'd be a doctor or surgeon when he grew up. Then he found out what surgeons do, "and I was like oh no, no, no — no blood."



So when his dad's job relocated his family, he took the opportunity to attend an arts school, checking off "like five out of the eight boxes" for interests in various programs at Duke Ellington School of the Arts, like singing, drawing and dancing. His mom still hasn't told him what happened with the scheduling the day of the singing audition, "but I missed it," he said.



He went to the dance audition instead and couldn't believe he could get graded on something that was so much fun. He was accepted, and his professional career began about five years later with the Dance Theatre of Harlem's second company. In 2011, five years and two more dance companies later, he was hired as an Ailey company member.

"It (Ailey) was almost too big for what I thought my career could be," Jackson said, laughing. He was one of the first handful of hires by then-new Director Battle.

“He’s really a brilliant dancer,” Battle said. “One that I chose, one of my first, when I was still new.”

Battle enjoys his role, which allows him to discover talent and give that talent a platform, he said.

He is the third artistic director in the company’s history, hand-picked by prior director Judith Jamison, who was hand-picked by Alvin Ailey himself.

New Orleanian Rosalyn Sanders, a graduate of the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, became a dancer with the Ailey company in 2000. Her last performance with Ailey in New Orleans was that most recent performance in 2010, something she said was shocking to realize.

Sanders departed from the company with Artistic Director Judith Jamison in 2011, and has just recently returned to New Orleans, where she teaches modern classes at NOBA. She is pursuing a master’s degree in arts administration at the University of New Orleans and is a graduate assistant at Dancing Grounds.



“When I heard the (Ailey) company was coming back this year, the same year that I had moved back, starting the rest of my schooling journey, I found it super, super important,” Sanders said. “Really coming full circle, almost.”

Sanders and Jackson both said separately that during their first years as a company member, it was hard to grasp the cultural significance of their jobs.

When Jackson first started at the company, he was thinking, “Ooh, I need to just make sure I do not fall on the stage.” It’s later when you can begin to understand the importance of Ailey’s prominence as worldwide cultural ambassadors, Sanders said.



Sanders did a high school project on Jamison, a dance legend who she would later come to know as her loving and giving artistic director. It is important, she said, for dancers in New Orleans to see people who look like them on stage, an opportunity she rarely had as a young African-American dancer, she said.

“For a company that is this huge to come back” to New Orleans “is beautiful,” Sanders said.

NOBA worked extensively with the Ailey company to create the two separate programs performed at the Mahalia Jackson Theater on March 22 and 23. Viewing both should showcase the breadth of Ailey’s repertoire, said Jenny Hamilton, executive director at NOBA.

Tickets begin at \$35 per performance, plus processing fees. On Friday evening, audiences will see “Stack-up” by Louisiana-born Talley Beatty; “The Call” by Ronald K. Brown; “Shelter” by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar; and the classic “Revelations” by Alvin Ailey.

Once you’ve performed “Revelations,” “that’s it, you’ve made it,” Sanders said of her experience.

Saturday’s program includes “Members Don’t Get Weary” by Jamar Roberts and “Ella” and “Juba” by Battle, all set to jazz music. The program concludes with Lang’s “EN.”

See more photos of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater below:

