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Perfect Timing for Their Next Move

By: Gia Kourlas
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Ailey Stars Turn to Baby Steps

After the birth of their son, Glenn Allen Sims and Linda Celeste Sims decided to retire from the dance company. [PAGE C1](#)

Perfect Timing for Their Next Move

Two star dancers, now parents, leave the stage for new lives.

By GIA KOURLAS

Glenn Allen Sims and Linda Celeste Sims did something many couples do: They had a baby. But they're no ordinary couple.

As two treasured veterans of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater — Glenn for 23 years, and Linda for 24 — they have long persisted in jobs that have pushed them to their physical limits. With the birth of their son, Ellington James Sims, in April 2019, they faced a new challenge.

Their last season at City Center, in December 2019, was exhausting — not that you would have known by their dancing: refined, impassioned and, as always, vibrating with life. Their coping mechanism? “We would go to the theater and fall asleep,” Mr. Sims, 45, said in a joint interview with Ms. Sims. “We would nap in our dressing room.”

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At the time Ellington — now nearly 20 months old and happily chirping in the background — wasn't sleeping through the night. “Initially, our plan was to continue to dance and stay with the company,” Ms. Sims, 44, said. “But with the Ailey company, the travel is really the issue.”

It's not just the dancing that takes a toll on Ailey dancers; it's the touring, which in a normal year can last five months or more. As they were making their decision to retire — before the pandemic hit — one question became increasingly easy to answer: “Do we take him on the road?”

“Why would I raise my child in a hotel?” Ms. Sims said. “And don't get me wrong — touring two weeks, three weeks? That's doable. But not months at a time. It was like we need the best for the baby.”

This Ailey season, a virtual one, will feature the couple's farewell performance on Wednesday, which will include an array of video excerpts from their repertoire; as well as a new film of the romantic central duet in “The Winter in Lisbon,” a celebratory work to Dizzy Gillespie by Billy Wilson; and a discussion with the pair led by the choreographer Ronald K. Brown. But it's not as though they will never dance again.

“Guest artist?” Ms. Sims said. “I'll be there if they need me. Or performing for certain special events.”

As for Mr. Sims, who said his “career has been spent in minimal clothing,” he won't miss the body-hugging unitards.

Just before the pandemic, in January, the couple moved from New Rochelle to a house in Mahopac, N.Y., where Ms. Sims has been teaching remotely at Marymount College, Ballet Hispánico and the Ailey Extension.



Linda Celeste Sims and Glenn Allen Sims of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will retire after a farewell performance.

Mr. Sims is working on a degree from SUNY Empire State College, where his focus is performing arts management. In an odd way, the timing of their decision to retire from Ailey during the pandemic has worked out. “We were able to leave and not feel the pressure of having to be in a workplace during this time,” Ms. Sims said.

When life returns to normal, Ms. Sims will become the rehearsal director for Ballet Hispánico, where she trained and danced. Mr. Sims is in discussions to become the company manager.

“I don't feel that I am leaving anything or that I haven't fulfilled my career,” Ms. Sims said. “I feel very well nourished and fed. And I still feel like there still could be another story.”

Their tale first began at Ailey, where they met and started to date in secret. “We were really, really young — 19 and 20,” Ms. Sims said. “We wanted to keep that space of when we're at work we're professional. No lovey-dovey stuff.”

They married in 2001 and eventually began to be cast together. Sometimes couples don't have the same chemistry onstage, but their partnership was a striking example of support and sophistication. In the most regal, understated way, they both remained in service to the choreography and showed themselves to their fullest power.

While Ailey has given them much — along with traveling the world, they've danced in nearly 100 works each over the years — Mr. Sims can pinpoint what he's missed out on: family. “Our family has always been a part of us and around us, but now there are more opportunities to just talk to them whenever I feel like I want to talk to them,” he said. “And now we have our own.”

What follows are edited excerpts from a recent interview.

You filmed “The Winter in Lisbon” for the virtual gala just last month. What does that performance say about you?

GLENN This is who we are today.

LINDA When I watched it the second time, I thought: Oh my goodness; how many people can actually say that at 44 they dance like this? As dancers we're so hard on ourselves that we forget that we also have to be grateful. And so I am very grateful to still be able to do the things that I can do physically, even after a child.

Above, Linda Celeste Sims and Glenn Allen Sims in a new film of “The Winter in Lisbon,” which will be part of their online farewell performance on Wednesday. Far left, Ms. Sims in the solo “Cry” by Alvin Ailey. Near left, the couple's son, Ellington. As dancers, they fell in love with Duke Ellington's music.



What stood out in your last New York season together, when you were actually onstage?

LINDA Being away from the stage a whole year, it felt different. I was like, I hope I fit into all my costumes. And I did! But being onstage with Glenn was just beautiful. Dancing fixed me. We did a lot of “Revelations,” and the way I would just hear the music would be different. I just felt very mature.

LINDA I did “Cry.” [The Ailey solo is dedicated “to all Black women everywhere — especially our mothers.”] I had two chances to perform it in the season and the first time I had so much to say — like when you're dying to eat something and you eat it so fast, but you didn't have time to savor it. I didn't allow it to simmer. So I was like, what are you holding back? What are you afraid of? Why don't you just go for it?

What did that feel like?

LINDA It was everything. I think I cried throughout the whole piece. I don't know what it looked like! [Laughs] Sometimes ugliness can be beautiful; I allowed myself to be that vulnerable. There's the whole experience of giving birth and — women don't talk about it — how exhausting [motherhood] is. There are really ugly moments where it's not just joy. It's like your baby's born, you're going to feel this joy and love. And it's like, no, it doesn't instantly happen all the time. I was like, well, I'm going to talk about it. [Laughs]

You didn't plan on having children. What changed your mind?

LINDA In Europe, traveling with the company, we would always go sightseeing, and I would see these families. I started to get the urge. It was pretty much when I turned 40. I feel complete with Glenn, so I don't want this to sound wrong, but I still felt that there was something missing.

GLENN And I gave her these crazy eyes because then you have to look around. . . . I looked around our apartment and I was like, OK, everything's going to change. The art on the wall, the glass table. Financially, how is it going to work? I started freaking out. It's something that I've wanted for a long time, but I never, ever wanted to pressure Linda about children. Ever.

LINDA And that's a beautiful thing. So after 18 years of marriage, we had Ellington.

Are you obsessed with Duke Ellington?

LINDA No! We weren't obsessed at all. But one of the pieces I feel like we were molding onstage every time we performed it was “The River” [set to Ellington]. The musicality, the choreography of Mr. Ailey's — it's just one of our favorite pieces. We fell in love with [Ellington's] music; it's not that we hear it every day, but we actually get to perform with his music. So we just thought, how do we find a name that is a connection between the two of us, but also unique enough for him to be himself?

GLENN This is also about the partnership that Ailey had with Duke Ellington and tying in the way that we met — through Ailey. It was something that we could always carry with us. So how do we honor our own careers and honor our son as well? With a great name.

‘I still feel like there still could be another story.’

LINDA CELESTE SIMS, SPEAKING OF LIFE AFTER DANCING