



ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

AILEY II | THE AILEY SCHOOL | AILEY ARTS IN EDUCATION & COMMUNITY PROGRAMS | AILEY EXTENSION
The Joan Weill Center for Dance 405 West 55th St, New York NY 10019-4402 (212) 405-9000 AlvinAiley.org

Robert Battle, Artistic Director Matthew Rushing, Associate Artistic Director Bennett Rink, Executive Director
Alvin Ailey, Founder Judith Jamison, Artistic Director Emerita

ALVIN AILEY DANCE FOUNDATION NAMES FRANCESCA HARPER AS ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE AILEY II COMPANY

New York – September 1, 2021 – [Robert Battle](#), Artistic Director of [Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater](#), announced today that internationally renowned performer, choreographer, director, and multi-disciplinary artist [Francesca Harper](#) has been appointed Artistic Director of [Ailey II](#), the Ailey organization’s acclaimed company of young dancers. Ms. Harper will assume her duties on September 7, 2021, and will immediately begin preparing for Ailey II’s return to the stage. Ailey II’s 2021-2022 season will kick off in December with participation in Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater’s [annual season at New York City Center](#), in which Ailey II will perform in Mr. Ailey’s classic [Memoria](#), and will continue with the company’s own 2022 New York City season March 23-April 3 at The Ailey Citigroup Theater, as well as a U.S. tour.

Selected through a rigorous international search guided by Arts Consulting Group, Ms. Harper was chosen for the position by Robert Battle and [Bennett Rink](#), Executive Director of the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation. Ms. Harper has choreographed works for both of the Ailey professional companies and Dance Theater of Harlem, Hubbard Street II, and La Bale Da Cidade, among others, as well as works commissioned by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, and her own The Francesca Harper Project; has been a principal dancer with Ballett Frankfurt and a featured performer in Broadway shows; has served as a consultant for major film and stage productions; and has extensive teaching experience, with posts at Juilliard, New York University, Barnard, and [The Ailey School](#)’s joint BFA program with Fordham University. She is the daughter of the late Denise Jefferson, who directed The Ailey School from 1984 to 2010.



Ailey II Artistic Director Francesca Harper.
Photo by Nina Wurtzer.
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Robert Battle said, “We are thrilled, and deeply proud, to be appointing the multi-talented Francesca Harper to lead Ailey II. After training at The Ailey School as a young dancer, she embarked on an extraordinarily successful professional career in dance, while regularly returning to teach and choreograph. She knew Mr. Ailey and drew inspiration as a dancer from Ms. Jamison. She is charismatic, caring, and utterly brilliant. Her vision for Ailey II will not only bring fresh perspectives to Mr. Ailey’s legacy, but also bring new voices to the stage and propel the Company forward. She is the perfect choice to lead Ailey II.”

Bennett Rink said, “Ailey II is about the next generation of dancers, and throughout this search process it became apparent to us that the Company’s future would be brightest with Francesca Harper’s extraordinary talent and versatility. She is a sought-after leader in the field and we could not be more pleased that she has chosen to commit herself to Ailey II.”

Francesca Harper said, “My mother, Denise Jefferson, was always my inspiration and mentor for teaching and giving back to the community. Through her work at The Ailey School she changed the landscape for young aspiring dance artists, including me, and was an unfailing example of courage and compassion. I feel I grew up at The Ailey School, and now, having performed and choreographed around the world, it is profoundly moving to me to come home, accepting the great privilege of leading Ailey II.”

As Ailey II’s Artistic Director, Ms. Harper will curate and oversee all aspects of the Company’s artistic and educational initiatives while honoring the traditions, legacy, and creative spirit of Alvin Ailey. As an experienced performer and a mentor who has taught and choreographed over the past three decades at The Ailey School, where she was herself a student, she has the ideal outlook to lead young dancers across Ailey II’s bridge from the classroom to the stage, sharing the broad spectrum of what it means to be a professional. Reporting to Ailey’s Artistic Director and Executive Director, she will collaborate with artists and administrators across the organization.

Ms. Harper and the Ailey organization are proud to name [Lakey Evans-Peña](#) as Rehearsal Director of the company. A former member of Ailey II herself, Ms. Evans-Peña has been serving as a teacher and advisor for The Ailey School and will continue in that role while taking up her new responsibilities with Ailey II.

Renowned for merging the spirit and energy of the country’s best young dance talent with the passion and creative vision of today’s most outstanding emerging choreographers, Ailey II was founded in 1974 as the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble. Since then, Ailey II has flourished into one of the most popular modern dance companies, combining a rigorous touring schedule with extensive community outreach programs.

About Francesca Harper

Francesca Harper began her professional dance career with Dance Theater of Harlem, after having performed at the White House as a young Presidential Scholar in the Arts, and subsequently was a member of William Forsythe’s Ballet Frankfurt (1991–1999), becoming a Principal Dancer in 1994. In Europe, she was chosen to perform with designers Issey Miyake and Gianni Versace and to perform in a film, *Dancing Pleats*, that was a 30-year retrospective of Issey Miyake’s design work in Japan. She also performed in Miyake’s and Versace’s fashion shows in Paris and Milan. Following a vocal performance in Frankfurt, she was invited to record her first single, *Slow Groove*, which was produced on a compilation album and distributed in Europe and the U.K. In 2006, she self-produced her own album, *Modo Fusion*, currently available on iTunes. Her first full evening of work as a choreographer, *Dark Violet Light Stone*, was commissioned by The Holland Dance Festival while she was still a member of Ballet Frankfurt.

Ms. Harper has performed in Broadway productions including *Fosse*, *All Shook Up*, and *The Color Purple*, and starred as Helene opposite Molly Ringwald in a national tour of *Sweet Charity* (2007) and in Judith Jamison’s role in a revival of *Sophisticated Ladies* (2009). She also created her first play for the Cherry Lane Theater in New York, *50 minutes with Harriet and Phillis*, produced by Anna Deavere Smith, with her aunt, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Margo Jefferson, and Paul Miller a.k.a DJ Spooky. She debuted her critically acclaimed one-woman show *The Look of Feeling* as a writer, actor, dancer, and vocalist in 2014 in New York City. She was invited to develop a new character for Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More*, jazz vocalist Cecilia Robertson, a.k.a. Ceci, as well as several other roles in the innovative, immersive production. In 2018, Ms. Harper was nominated for Best Actress in a Musical by Broadway.com for her role as Billie Holiday in a production of *Lady Day at Emerson’s Bar and Grill*.

Her television appearances include *Boardwalk Empire*, *Late Night with David Letterman*, and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. She also served as ballet consultant for the feature film *Black Swan* (2010), directed by Darren Aronofsky and starring Natalie Portman, who won an Oscar for her performance. Ms. Harper was also a featured performer in *Zinnias – The Life of Clementine Hunter* directed by Robert Wilson, touring internationally with the production. She received a Living History Award in 2013 during Black History Month from Long Island University and the Innovation and Technology Award for her choreography for Fashion Week with designer Louis Vuitton. She is the writer, producer, composer, and narrator of the documentary film *To Lillian* (2021).

Ms. Harper has choreographed works for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ailey II, Dance Theater of Harlem, Hubbard Street II, Tanz Graz, and many more companies, including her own The Francesca Harper Project, which she founded in 2005. The Francesca Harper Project has performed at venues including La Biennale di Venezia, Holland Dance Festival, Harkness Dance Festival, The Colors Festival in Stuttgart, Central Park Summerstage, New York City Center, Harlem Stage, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and The Joyce Theater. Ms. Harper served as movement director for Nick Cave’s *The Let Go*, commissioned by the Park Avenue Armory, which received a Bessie Award for Outstanding Production. Ms. Harper is a long-time artistic collaborator with MacArthur Foundation “genius award” visual artist Carrie Mae Weems, rock star Nona Hendryx, multimedia artist Carl Hancock Rux, and Margo Jefferson. Ms. Harper was awarded a two-year choreographic fellowship with Urban Bush Women, providing support toward her dance-theater work *An Unapologetic Body*, and a Fellowship at The Ballet Center at NYU. Recent engagements include serving as co-director and choreographer for the musical *Rose’s War* and as movement director for Tommy Hilfiger and Zendaya for their fashion show at the Apollo Theater in fall 2019.

During quarantine, Ms. Harper was the creator and directorial consultant for 16 world premiere virtual films. Her latest works include a new creation for Wendy Whelan, Associate Artistic Director of New York City Ballet, and renowned poet Marc Bamuthi Joseph. Ms. Harper is currently engaged as Executive Producer with Sony Pictures on a series in development.

As an educator, Ms. Harper has served as a Professor at The Juilliard School, an adjunct professor at NYU, a former associate professor at Barnard College, and a professor in the Ailey/Fordham BFA program. She is currently pursuing an MFA in performance creation at Goddard College.

About Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, recognized by U.S. Congressional resolution as a vital American “Cultural Ambassador to the World,” grew from a now-fabled March 1958 performance in New York that changed forever the perception of American dance. Founded by Alvin Ailey, posthumous recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom – the nation’s highest civilian honor, and guided by Judith Jamison beginning in 1989, the Company is now led by Robert Battle, whom Judith Jamison chose to succeed her on July 1, 2011. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has performed for an estimated 25 million people in 71 countries on 6 continents – as well as millions more through television broadcasts, film screenings, and online platforms - promoting the uniqueness of the African-American cultural experience and the preservation and enrichment of the American modern dance tradition. In addition to being the Principal Dance Company of New York City Center, where its performances have become a year-end tradition, the Ailey company performs annually at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC, the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago, the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts of Miami-Dade County in Miami, The Fox Theatre in Atlanta, Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley, CA and at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark where it is the Principal Resident Affiliate), and appears frequently in other major theaters throughout the United States and the world during extensive yearly tours. The Ailey organization also includes Ailey II (1974), a second performing company of emerging young dancers and innovative choreographers; The Ailey School (1969), one of the most extensive dance training programs in the world; Ailey Arts in Education & Community Programs, which brings dance into the classrooms, communities and lives of people of all ages; and The Ailey Extension (2005), a program offering dance and fitness classes to the general public, which began with the opening of Ailey’s permanent home—the largest building dedicated to dance in New York City, the dance capital of the world —named The Joan Weill Center for Dance, at 55th Street at 9th Avenue in New York City. For more information, visit www.alvinailey.org.

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