COMPANY STORY

Ailey II is universally renowned for merging the spirit and energy of the country’s best early-career dance talent with the passion and artistry of today’s most outstanding choreographers.

Founded in 1974, the company embodies Alvin Ailey’s pioneering mission to establish an extended cultural community that provides dance performances, training, and community programs for all people.

Ailey II flourished into one of the most popular dance companies in the county under the leadership of Sylvia Waters, who was selected by Mr. Ailey to be its founding Artistic Director, serving in that role for the Company’s first 38 seasons. With Artistic Director Francesca Harper at the helm, Ailey II continues to thrive as she brings a fresh dimension to this beloved company.

The company’s repertory has included works by dance masters Alvin Ailey, Talley Beatty, Donald Byrd, Ulysses Dove, George W. Faison, Lar Lubovitch, Judith Jamison and Ailey’s Artistic Director Robert Battle as well as works by rising choreographers such as Sidra Bell, Jae Man Joo, Carlos dos Santos, and Christopher L. Huggins. Ailey II’s 12 rising stars inspire audiences in dozens of cities across the globe.

WHAT CRITICS ARE SAYING

“The dancers in Ailey II are spectacular beings”
- The New York Times

“The dancers proved indefatigable, virtuosic and relentlessly sexy.”
- Los Angeles Times

“Some of the country’s best young dancers.”
- The Kansas City Star
COMMUNITY OUTREACH OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to Ailey II’s awe-inspiring performances, the company also offers three community outreach opportunities: the master class, the lecture/demonstration and the schooltime performance.

MASTER CLASS
Trained dancers take class with the young professionals of Ailey II and get a glimpse of their daily routine. One teacher and two demonstrators make it easy for participants to follow and ask questions in the 60-90 minute modern dance class. Master classes typically accommodate 25-30 students at the middle school level or older.

LECTURE/DEMONSTRATION
A mixture of narration, demonstration, participation, and Q & A session, the lecture/demonstration is great for students age 8 and older. Company members demonstrate techniques from popular repertory, speak about the company’s history and their personal experiences, and answer audience questions in this 45-60 minute session.

SCHOOLTIME PERFORMANCES
Young students and families experience a dynamic performance with full costumes, lighting and sound that is only one hour in length – perfect for the young audience member. Programming is adapted to be age-appropriate. These performances must be held on a theater stage.
Francesca Harper, Artistic Director

Francesca Harper began her professional dance career with Dance Theater of Harlem. She was a member of William Forsythe's Ballett Frankfurt from 1991-1999 where she became a principal dancer in 1994. She has performed on Broadway in productions including *Fosse, All Shook Up, The Color Purple, Sweet Charity,* and *Sophisticated Ladies,* and was nominated for Best Actress in a Musical by Broadway.com for her role as Billie Holiday in *Lady Day at Emerson’s Bar and Grill.* Ms. Harper created her first play, *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. In 2014, she debuted her critically acclaimed one-woman show, *The Look of Feeling,* as a writer, actor, dancer, and vocalist. She is also the writer, producer, composer, and narrator of the documentary film *To Lillian* (2021). Ms. Harper has choreographed works for companies including Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ailey II, Dance Theater of Harlem, Hubbard Street II, and Tanz Graz, as well as The Francesca Harper Project, which she founded in 2005. Her television and film credits include appearances on *Boardwalk Empire,* *Late Night with David Letterman,* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show.* She served as ballet consultant for the motion picture *Black Swan* and was featured in *Zinnias – The Life of Clementine Hunter,* directed by Robert Wilson. In 2013, Ms. Harper received a Living History Award 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 also served 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 2019. 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 poet Marc Bamuthi Joseph. Currently, Ms. Harper is engaged as Executive Producer with Sony Pictures on a series in development and pursuing an MFA in performance creation at Goddard College.

Lakey Evans-Peña, Rehearsal Director

Lakey Evans-Peña is a performer, educator, movement director, community advocate, and artistic mentor. Presently she serves as the Rehearsal Director for Ailey II, the Ailey/Fordham Student Dancers, and as a master teacher of the Horton technique. Her teaching, rehearsing and coaching practice is centered in cultural relevance, artistic empowerment, and performance practice. Ms. Evans-Peña received her BFA from the University of the Arts and her MFA from Montclair State University. She was a scholarship recipient at The Ailey School and subsequently joined Ailey II where she performed principal roles in works by Alvin Alley, Ronald K. Brown, and Eleo Pomare. She was a lead in Donald Byrd’s national tour of *The Harlem Nutcracker* and additionally performed Byrd’s choreography for the New York City Opera’s production of *Carmina Burana.* In 2009, she founded the Williamsburg Movement & Arts Center in Brooklyn, NY. As the Artistic and Executive Director, she developed school and community partnerships which enabled over three thousand students a year to explore dance through daytime residencies and afterschool programming. Ms. Evans-Peña has taught extensively throughout the U.S. and served as a visiting professor at Marymount Manhattan College, Montclair State University, AMDA, and as artist in residence at Hollins University.
Nicholas Begun (Brooklyn, NY) started his formal dance training at Ballet Tech in New York City. He attended Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts and received his degree from the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program in 2021. Mr. Begun has performed for three seasons in the Radio City Christmas Spectacular. This is his second season with Ailey II.

Andrew Bryant (Miami, FL) began his formal dance training at the Young Contemporary Dance Theatre in his hometown, under the direction of Traci Young Byron. He received his BFA from Towson University where he studied under renowned artists Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell, Vincent Thomas, and Runqiao Du. After graduating, Mr. Bryant trained at The Ailey School as a scholarship student where he performed works by Alvin Ailey, Bradley Shelsver, and Rebecca Margoick. This is his first season with Ailey II.

Spencer Everett (Stratford, ON, Canada) graduated from the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program in 2022 with an honorable mention in dance and departmental honors in visual arts. He began his dance training in a variety of techniques at a local studio in his hometown. Mr. Everett also trained at The School of Toronto Dance Theatre as a scholarship student. He has worked with choreographers Omar Roman de Jesus, Helen Simoneau, Yusha Marie-Sorzano, Jamar Roberts, and Yoshito Sakuraba, and performed in Alvin Ailey’s Memoria during Ailey’s 2019 and 2021 New York City Center seasons. This is his first season with Ailey II.

Jaryd Farcon (Fords, NJ) received his degree from the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program and is a graduate of Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts. Mr. Farcon is a National YoungArts Foundation winner in dance and worked with Mikhail Baryshnikov and Julie Taymor. He appeared on Dancing With The Stars, So You Think You Can Dance, and in recording music group BTS’s “Permission to Dance” United Nations General Assembly music video. He trained in summer programs at Jacob’s Pillow, Orsolina 28, Alonzo King Lines Ballet, and Ballet Hispánico. This is his first season with Ailey II.

Maya Finman-Palmer (Madison, WI) graduated from The Ailey School where she trained in the Certificate Program. She attended summer intensives at Ballet Hispanico, Jennifer Archibald’s ArchCore40, Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance, Kanopy Dance Academy, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, and The Ailey School. Ms. Finman-Palmer performed as a soloist in Prelude & Fugue, choreographed by Lisa Thurrell, and in Next@Graham. She danced in Alvin Ailey’s Memoria during Ailey’s 2021 New York City Center season, and has also performed works by choreographers Patrick Coker, Amy Hall Garner, Martha Graham, and Bradley Shelsver. This is her first season with Ailey II.

Patrick Gamble (Queens, NY) began his dance training at the age of five in The Ailey School’s Junior Division. He recently graduated from the Ailey/Fordham BFA program with a double major in Art History, through the generosity of the Glorya Kaufman Scholarship. Mr. Gamble also trained at Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, Jacob’s Pillow, Move NYC’s Sweat, Orsolina 28, and Springboard Danse Montreal. He performed works by Robert Battle, Ohad Naharin, William Forsythe, Rena Butler, and Francesca Harper, and has appeared on the television shows Saturday Night Live, Gossip Girl, and HBO’s Random Acts of Flynness. This is Mr. Gamble’s first season with Ailey II.

Meagan King (Brooklyn, NY) graduated magna cum laude from the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program, receiving the Glorya Kaufman Scholarship. She has been featured in Dance Spirit magazine, The Today Show and at the Holland Dance Festival. Ms. King was a student at Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts. She was the 2019 and 2020 BLOCH Aliey Young Artist. She is also an alumni of the 2018 Contemporary Program at Jacob’s Pillow. Ms. King has choreographed for the Color Me Beautiful production in Virginia and LaGuardia High School’s 2021 Senior Graduation Dance Concert. This is her second season with Ailey II.
Kali Marie Oliver (Akron, Ohio) graduated Magna Cum Laude from the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program. She began her formal dance training with her mother and attended summer intensives at Chautauqua Institution, Alonzo King LINES Ballet, and The Ailey School. Ms. Oliver has performed works by Alvin Ailey, Karole Armitage, William Forsythe, Andrea Miller, William Isaac, and Maurya Kerr. She also performed in Mr. Ailey’s Memoria during the 2018, 2019, and 2021 Ailey New York City Center seasons, and represented The Ailey School in the 2019 Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. This is Ms. Oliver’s first season with Ailey II.

Amar Smalls (Brooklyn, NY) began his dance training at The Abrons Arts Center Henry Street Settlement. In 2017, he graduated from Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts. Mr. Smalls trained at The Ailey School, Harlem School of the Arts, and Steps on Broadway. He has worked with choreographers including William Forsythe, Andrea Miller, Francesca Harper, and Darrell Grand Moultrie. Mr. Smalls is also a choreographer whose works have been broadcast on NBC’s The Today Show and set on soloists at the New York City Dance Alliance. At age 16, Mr. Smalls started Brokeland, an art collective where artists create music, film, and paintings. This is his third season with Ailey II.

Tamia Strickland (Silver Springs, MD) began her dance training at the age of six. She is currently a student in the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program, where she received the 2021 Denise Jefferson Memorial Scholarship. Ms. Strickland performed in the 2020 Ailey Virtual Season, and in Ailey’s 2021 Opening Night Gala at New York City Center. She has worked with choreographers, including Hope Boykin, Clifton Brown, Freddie Moore, Matthew Rushing, Janice Rosario, Chuck Wilt, and Sarah O’Gleby. This is her first season with Ailey II.

Maggy Van Den Heuvel (Houten, Utrecht, Netherlands) graduated in 2018 from Lucia Marthas Institute for Performing Arts in Amsterdam. She trained as a scholarship student at The Ailey School where she received the Joan Weill Spirit Award. Ms. van den Heuvel has performed works by Anthony Burrell, Yusha-Marie Sorzano, Ray Mercer, Norbert De La Cruz, and Kirven J. Boyd. She has appeared on The Today Show, Good Morning America, Extra TV, and was a lead dancer in Teyana Taylor’s music video Lose Each Other featuring Elton John. She is also a recipient of a Young Talent Award by Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds. This is Ms. van den Heuvel’s first season with Ailey II.

Travon M. Williams (Chicago, IL) began his formal dance training in the Joffrey Community Engagement program under Pierre Lockett. He graduated from Chicago High School for the Arts and received scholarships to attend the Chicago MultiCultural Dance Center, Debbie Allen School of Dance, Ballet Chicago, Ballet Austin, and Deeply Rooted. Mr. Williams is also a graduate of The Ailey School Certificate Program. He has performed works by Darrell Grand Moultrie, Amy Hall, Pierre Lockett, Kevin Iega, Yusha-Marie Sorzano, and Omar Roman de Jesus. Most recently, Mr. Williams appeared on the HBO Max series, Legendary. This is his second season with Ailey II.

Rachel Yoo (Bridgewater, NJ) is a graduate of the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program. She began her classical dance training at the New Jersey School of Ballet. Ms. Yoo attended Somerset County Vocational & Technical High School where she studied dance under the direction of Sheila Sullivan. She trained at Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, Parsons Dance, and Peridance Blueprint. Ms. Yoo has performed works by Alvin Ailey, Robert Battle, William Forsythe, Andrea Miller, Norbert De La Cruz Ill, Gabrielle Lamb, and Chuck Wilt, and has danced with Barkin/Selissen Project and McCoy Dance Project. This is her second season with Ailey II.
**Alfred L. Jordan II** (Memphis, TN) began his dance training at the age of 12 at a local studio in his hometown. He later studied at The Ailey School where he trained as a scholarship student. In 2021, Mr. Jordan performed in Alvin Ailey’s *Bird Live* during Ailey’s New York City Center gala, and in 2022, he danced in Robert Battle’s *Awakening* at Ailey’s Spirit Gala at Lincoln Center. He has worked with choreographers including Amy Hall Garner, Bradley Shelver, Stephanie Batten Bland, and Judine Somerville. This is Mr. Jordan’s first season as an apprentice with Ailey II.

**Kiri Moore** (Culpeper, VA) began her dance training in Virginia at the Orange School of Performing Arts, and continued to study in Philadelphia, PA at The Rock School for Dance Education. She is a graduate of The Ailey School Certificate Program where she performed in Alvin Ailey’s *Memoria* during Ailey’s 2021 New York City Center season. Ms. Moore has also worked with choreographers Amy Hall Garner, Bradley Shelver, Patrick Coker, Hollie Wright, and Judine Somerville. This is her first season as an apprentice with Ailey II.

**Kayla Mei-Wan Thomas** (Cleveland, OH) graduated summa cum laude from the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program in 2022 with a double major in Digital Technologies and Emerging Media. In 2020, she was the recipient of the Denise Jefferson Memorial Scholarship. Ms. Thomas has performed works by Robert Battle, Hope Boykin, and Helen Simoneau, and has danced with the Nai Ni Chen Dance Company. This is her first season as an apprentice with Ailey II.
PUBLICITY HIGHLIGHTS
WHAT THE CRITICS ARE SAYING ABOUT AILEY II

“The dancers in Ailey II are spectacular beings.”
The New York Times

“Highbrow/Brilliant.”
New York magazine

“Ailey II audiences get to see tomorrow’s stars today.”
New York Amsterdam News

“Second to none.”
Dance Magazine

“Ailey II continues the legacy of founder Alvin Ailey, delivering pristine performances with dynamic movement and dazzling technique.”
Atlanta Journal-Constitution

“Young, gifted, talented and thrilling”
Amsterdam News

“The dancers...have power and maturity.”
New York Post

“The twelve members of Ailey II...are all superb young dancers, with powerful jumps, leg extensions that never quit, and innate theatricality...”
The Village Voice

“The performers’ technique and performance quality continues to be some of the best in the country.”
The Examiner

“...the dancers of Ailey II simply never disappoint. What can’t the dancers of Ailey II do? The answer: They can do no wrong.”
New York Amsterdam News

“...they are, in fact, far from human in their immense capability.”
The Dance Enthusiast

“...there’s nothing like an evening spent with Ailey II... there were promising, even sparkling performances.”
The New York Times

“To watch the outstanding crop of dancers...is to wonder where they’ll end up next, and to hope they find jobs worthy of their talent...”
The New York Times
(NASHVILLE, Tenn. (WTVF) — At least 600 area students were in the audience at TPAC to watch a Performance by the Ailey II Dance Troupe, a dance company formed by Alvin Ailey in the mid-70s.

Most of these students were invited because they take dance or theatre classes at school. The dancers performed for an hour, and then the director and artists answered questions from students about their training and the challenges of their profession.
Chicago native Travon M. Williams among Ailey II dancers to perform in University Park
By: Jessi Virtusio
October 6, 2022

While attending The Chicago High School for the Arts, Travon M. Williams hoped to eventually join Ailey II, which is billed as The Next Generation of Dance.

“When I was in high school, we wrote letters and we couldn’t open them until graduation. In my freshman letter I wrote, ‘I hope you get in to Juilliard or Ailey II.’ Actually I got wait-listed for Juilliard and I’m in Ailey II,” said Williams, who is in his second season with Ailey II.

“It was a crazy, full circle moment. I was grateful that I worked hard to get to where I am, and I’m grateful for all the help that I had to get where I am and the training that I had as well.”

Ailey II travels from New York to University Park to perform on Oct. 15 at Governors State University’s Center for Performing Arts.

“It’s going to be a great program,” said Williams, who grew up on Chicago’s West Side in the Austin community and now lives in New York City’s Bronx borough. “It’s going to be very moving.” The performance by Ailey II, which is the second company of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, includes “mediAcation” by Elizabeth Roxas-Dobrish.

“She’s a former member of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. The piece explores communication and the impact of social media. It’s showing a media connection by the use of ropes,” Williams said.

“Six dancers move in sync with one another before merging into three duets coupled with music by various artists including Nicholas Britell and Alberto Iglesias.” The Ailey II program also features an excerpt of William Forsythe’s “Enemy in the Figure,” which was created in Germany for his ensemble, Ballet Frankfurt, and has been performed in full at major venues worldwide.

“This excerpt pushes us artistically, mentally and physically,” Williams said.

“They’re thinking about all these different ways to explore your body and go beyond comfortability. The costume is a lot of shingles like fringe. It’s cool and the lighting is cool. It’s amazing.”

“The Hunt” by Robert Battle, artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and restaged by Elisa Clark is also part of Ailey II’s Southland show.

“This ballet examines the relationships between modern sport and the rituals of gladiators, revealing the aggressive side. We’re screaming and growling in certain parts of the piece. We have skirts. That will be fun. It’s a lot of stomping and jumping,” Williams said.

The touring repertoire also features the Ailey II debut of Andrea Miller, artistic director of Gallim Dance, via “Psůkhe,” which is described as an Ancient Greek word meaning “life’s breath, spirit and soul” and the origin for the English word “psyche.” The piece is set to Nicolás Jaar’s electronic music. “Andrea Miller is known for versatile, imaginative work,” said Williams, who grew up doing hip hop dance at first. “‘Psůkhe’ is colorful.”

His formal dance training started in the Joffrey Community Engagement program under Pierre Lockett, who invited Williams to join The Joffrey Ballet’s Exelon Strobel Dancers program in downtown Chicago after seeing Williams in Joffrey’s Middle School Dance Clubs in-school program.

“What made me want to join the Ailey organization as a whole was when I was 14 my dance mentor, Pierre Lockett, took me to see Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at Auditorium Theatre. For the first time I saw Ailey do ‘Revelations,’” Williams said.
“I noticed how they moved. It was soulful. I loved how they moved the audience without touching them and to see people of all backgrounds and African American women and men showing techniques I’d never seen before. I knew that I needed to be there.”

Williams also trained at Chicago Multi-Cultural Dance Center, which is led by Homer Hans Bryant; Ballet Chicago and Deeply Rooted Dance Theater in Chicago.

“The storytelling behind dance is so beautiful. It’s so powerful. You can make people literally cry or you can inspire someone or you can change someone’s life just by dancing. You never know what dance can do for someone,” Williams said.

“Just by me seeing the Ailey show, now I’m part of the legacy. Now I’m in a space where I can inspire the next generation and I’ve always wanted to do that. I’ve always wanted to give back to the community and help the younger kids who don’t have many resources.

“I wanted to be someone that any child can look up to no matter the color of their skin, ethnicity or nationality. I wanted to inspire people to know that no matter what someone tells you, you can do it.”

In 2021 he appeared under the name Tray Tisci as part of House of Tisci on Season 2 of the HBO Max voguing reality competition series “Legendary.”

“It was really different because you’re dealing with people’s emotions and attitudes but it was also very fun,” Williams said.

“Being in front of the camera, behind the camera, seeing how productions work and how much goes into filming the show, it was a great experience.

“I’m taking everything that I learned from that show and bringing (it to) my life — practicing patience and organization and staying in the moment and not beating yourself up when things get hard.”

Williams noted that Ailey II artistic director Francesca Harper is an encouraging leader.

“What I love about her is she’s a great visionary. She pushes us artistically, mentally and physically. She makes us ask questions and explore our bodies. We do a lot of improvisation and it really helps us,” he said.

“She does not allow us to beat ourselves up or get angry with ourselves. She will tell us to be in the moment, be yourself, and not look at anyone else and compare ourselves. She helps all of us bring our own artistry out of each other.”

Ailey II
When: 7:30 p.m. Oct. 15
Where: Governors State University's Center for Performing Arts, 1 University Parkway, University Park
Tickets: $45-$59 adults; $20 ages 14 and younger
Information: 708-235-2222; govst.edu/about/center_for_performing_arts
Performance Enhancers: A new wave of leaders are transforming the dance world
May – June 2022

Performance Enhancers
A new wave of leaders are transforming the dance world

Born and raised in Harlem, the celebrated Darrell Grand Moultrie works across ballet, contemporary, and commercial dance genres with ease, winning multiple awards along the way. His latest crowd-pleasing piece, Indestructible Light, created in a pandemic bubble, was set to the recordings of Duke Ellington and performed by ABT on tour.

FRANCESCA HARPER
Artistic Director, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater
The dancer, choreographer, singer, actor, producer, teacher, director, and educator, as well as ballet consultant for the Oscar-winning Black Swan, became the artistic director of Alvin Ailey II eight months ago, following in the footsteps of her late mother, Denise Jefferson, who directed the Alvin Ailey School from 1984 until 2010. “It feels so much bigger than me,” she has said of the appointment.

KYLE ABRAHAM
Choreographer and Artistic Director, A.I.M. (Abraham in Motion)
The multi-award-winning artistic director of Abraham in Motion has been on fire recently, creating solo work for dancers such as ABT megastar Misty Copeland. His collaboration during the pandemic with NYCB, When We Fell, was feted by the New York Times as being “among the most beautiful dance films of the pandemic.”

JANET ROLLÉ
CEO and Executive Director, American Ballet Theatre
The former manager of Beyoncé’s business empire arrives at a uniquely challenging time following catastrophic losses of revenue during the pandemic, while ballet continues to struggle with attracting younger audiences. But Rollé has the business chops for the job, not to mention a lifelong passion for dance ever since her mother enrolled her in class when she was 8.

AESHIA ASH
Associate Chair of Faculty, School of American Ballet
Since becoming the first Black female member of the permanent faculty of S.A.B. two years ago, the former student and New York City Ballet dancer has been an agent of change. In June she takes up the newly created position of associate chair, overseeing the relationship between faculty and students. “I have this hyper-awareness of that student who is shy in the corner and just needs someone to pull them out.”

CAMILLE A. BROWN
Dancer, choreographer, educator, and founder, Camille A. Brown & Dancers
The trailblazing Brown is used to scoring firsts: last fall the Guggenheim Fellow and five-time winner of the Princess Grace Award became the Metropolitan Opera’s first Black director, co-directing and choreographing Terence Blanchard’s opera Fire Shut Up in My Bones. This spring she directs and choreographs the revival of Ntozake Shange’s For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf, making her the first Black woman to both direct and choreograph a Broadway show in 65 years.
Dancers of Ailey II return after lengthy pandemic pause: "It's a homecoming for me," says artistic director

Francesca Harper

By: Dave Carlin
March 26, 2022

NEW YORK - The dancers of Ailey II are back on stage after a long pandemic pause.

The season returns with exciting new works and leader Francesca Harper, who tells CBS2's Dave Carlin she feels like she's just come home.

Carlin had an Illuminating conversation with Harper, the renowned dancer, choreographer, singer and writer whose role now is artistic director of Ailey II. On Wednesday the season opened, and she took the stage to introduce her dancers. She has familiarity with Ailey dating back to her childhood. Her mother was a dancer and longtime educator at Ailey, and she counts as her mentors the legend Judith Jamison and Sylvia Waters. She talked about the new work she premiered for the company and how she hopes it brings people hope.

"It's a homecoming for me. It means so much. This is where I grew up, you know. To be asked, invited back to the Ailey building, into the Ailey family is just full circle," Harper said. "My job as the artistic director is to kind of sweep in and inspire." Harper praised the work ethic of the dancers.

"The Ailey II dancers - I never have to push any one of them, and they've been off for 18 months. And then coming back, and they're hungrier and more voracious than ever," Harper said. "They are so savvy and they are so educated I just have to give them morsels and they just fly." Harper explained some of her work.

"In my freedom series ... there's a trio for three women, and those are the three women, Sylvia Waters, Judith Jamison and my mother, and they just appeared in that work the three ladies here. Those are my examples," she said. "Why?" "Because they paved the way for me," Harper said. "And also I think they really represent hope. Its been a challenging time for us but I really wanted to create a work, it's like, OK, our hope is always there with us, that we can carry it independently and collectively," Harper said. You may recognize Harper from Dance Theater of Harlem, Ballet Frankfurt, numerous Broadway shows, TV appearances.

The artistic director of Alvin Ailey's first, or main, company is Robert Battle, and he's celebrating 10 years in that role. The main Ailey company returns to the New York City stage this summer.
ALVIN AILEY II ARTISTIC DIRECTOR MAKES NEW YORK CITY DEBUT
By: Kemberly Richardson
March 23, 2022

UPPER WEST SIDE, Manhattan (WABC) -- In celebration of Women’s History Month, we highlight a trailblazer in the world of ballet who is now heading up the next generation of performers at a dance theater in New York City. Francesca Harper is making her New York City debut as the artistic director at Alvin Ailey II on Wednesday night.

Harper is following her mother, the late Denise Jefferson's footsteps. Her mother directed the Ailey school for roughly 26 years.

When Jefferson was a child dreaming of becoming a ballerina, a teacher pointed out that there were none of color, and she quit. She would later return to dance, but that story stuck with Harper.

"While I was studying at Ailey it was living in the back of my mind, like hmmmm, what would this mean to kind of be a trailblazer in the ballet world," Harper said. She would go on to join the Frankfurt ballet.

Now in her new role, Harper cherishes guiding people like Brena Thompson who gave some advice for younger dancers. "Be open to no's, I've heard that a lot in my career, I'm just super open, super blessed," Thompson said.

Harper will pay tribute to her mother and showcase a mix of new material in her upcoming performances including Robert Battle's work 'Searchlight.' "We have that Ailey honoring of the soulful nature, but sometimes a little bit of an edge that makes you a little uncomfortable here, let me find my way," Harper said. Performances run now through April 3rd at the Ailey Citigroup Theater, a much anticipated homecoming.

This segment aired on 3/23/22: https://abc7ny.com/amp/alvin-ailey-francesca-harper-ii-artistic-director/11675772/ (2 minutes)
He used to dance on N.J. city streets. How this local dancer made it to his Ailey II debut.

By: Jacqueline Cutler

March 30, 2022 (Online 3/23/22)

DANCE

He used to dance on N.J. city streets. How this local man made it to his Ailey II debut.

Jacqueline Cutler For The Star-Ledger

For Christopher Taylor, dancing in the street led to dancing on the stage. Taylor had a blast dancing in Military Park, he says, while growing up in Newark. He recently made his debut as a member of Ailey II, where he takes the stage at Manhattan’s the Alvin Cisgrove Theater, playing until April 3.

“I’m so excited,” Taylor, 22, tells NJ Advance Media. “I’m also excited because it’s Robert Battle’s 10th anniversary as the company’s artistic director, and we’re doing ‘Allegro,’ and so many physical pieces that I love. It’s something that we really saw in the studio when we’re giving so much of ourselves — like not even just dancing, but also acting and deep within the dance, giving so much emotionally. We were just joking about it yesterday like we don’t need therapy; there is so much emotion and whatnot in dance.

Taylor will dance. Take the bow, then return home to New Jersey. He lives on the Newark border, just over the line in Hillside. His roots are deep. His grand- mother owned Hillside’s Lillian’s Soul Food Restaurant (now closed). His mom, whom Taylor refers to as a “free spirit,” was not around much, and his father wasn’t at all, but his grandmother, whom he calls his rock, was always there. And she loved music.

As he talks over a Zoom interview, a smile creases his face as he mentions how the tunes from house parties back in Newark had him moving. Taylor was someone who could always feel the music, he says. He recalls when he realized how much he loved it and that others liked watching him dance.

“Three times my grandmother had taken me to Military Park in downtown Newark, that park would have house music every during the summer,” he says. “From since I was 5 to 12, I was going there, just dancing, and people would give me money. People who knew me would say, ‘Oh, that’s Lillian and her grandson, little Christopher.’ They know me and everything, and it’s like community.

In middle school, Taylor started to learn about more structured dance through summer camps — one of which would change his life.

Taylor had the opportunity to study at AileyCamp when he was 11. The camp’s then-director, Felicia A. Swoope — now executive director of Newark Arts — recalls Taylor as a young standout.

“Christopher Taylor was already a star as a middle schooler,” Swoope says. “I remember that he excelled at everything during AileyCamp Newark and arrived each day with an energy that was contagious and exciting. We could all see a star in the making. I am elated that he is now a member of Ailey II.”

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has hugely influenced Taylor, from the cadence of its music to the technique of modern dance. Taking classes at the iconic Manhattan studio, he tried out and made it. Initially, his grandmother took him into Manhattan on weekends, but when he turned 13, she taught him how to navigate NJT to New York to audition.

He found he loved learning ballet and the Horton method of modern dance. Taking classes showed him there was another way as some of his friends fell prey to the lure of the street. He loved in different neighborhoods around Newark.

“I don’t live in a best of areas,” Taylor says. “I’m not saying my area is horrible, but it’s not the best, and I wish my neighborhood was better. My friends, they’ve gotten stuck in the street, gone to jail, or they’ve given up.”

But dance. Taylor says, he was introduced to a new world. But more is needed, he adds.

“Christopher Taylor recently made his debut with Ailey II. We asked Taylor to talk about his Ailey II debut. In Newark, New Jersey. If I’m over here trying to make a video in the street, people are like, ‘Is he crazy?’ Literally, somebody came up to me like, ‘Are you OK?’ and I’m like, ‘I’m just recording a video for something.’ I’m a dancer.”

Between Ailey classes and graduating from Arts High School, it’s been a decade of dance for Taylor. He also runs and boxes to keep in shape — supplementing the eight hours a day in the studio.

“I always get nervous, I feel uncomfortable before I get on stage, but as soon as I take my first step and get into it, it’s just amazing. This is a beautiful feeling. It’s euphoric.
When Meagan King found out she would be dancing alongside the other members of prestigious dance company Ailey II, she says it was like a dream being fulfilled.

As a middle school student in Brooklyn, she was first inspired to get into dance when she saw a performance by Ailey II — an offshoot of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater — on YouTube.

“I knew that was a path for me then, so to finally realize it for myself and step into that power and ignite this new journey is super special for me,” she told BK Reader.

King will be one of 12 dancers taking to the stage as part of the Ailey II dance company — and one of three that hail from Brooklyn — when the company returns to the stage March 23 for a two-week season. The company, founded in 1958 by Alvin Ailey, embodies Ailey’s mission to establish an extended cultural community that provides dance performances, training and community programs for all people, the organization says.

After a pandemic-induced hiatus, the company will be returning to Ailey Citigroup Theater for the two-week run ending April 3 with multiple programs led by new Artistic Director Francesca Harper.

For King, the opportunity to dance with the company and under Harper’s guidance gives her the freedom “to dive into who you are, and showcase who you are unapologetically.”

“The past year, especially with the pandemic, has been an eye opening experience for me to realize that I’m not a product of an institution, I’m an individual artist who has much to offer this institution,” she says, adding, “I realized I had so many gems within me that I can share for the greater good as opposed to making it that I’m just a dancer within this company I’m so happy to be a part of, but I have so much to offer.”

It will be King’s first season with the company, along with fellow Brooklynite, Nicholas Begun. Both King and Begun attended the LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts and are alumni of the Ailey/Fordham BFA program.

Begun, who says dancing for Ailey II has been a long-held goal, is coming into the new season after a tumultuous two years for the arts community, which he says have definitely affected his outlook on the artform. “Just by the nature of the isolation we all experienced throughout the quarantine, I feel like it was a moment to really dive inwards and do some reflection and see how that influenced my movement,” Begun says. He says the period of social and political upheaval also prompted him to think more about art as a movement for change, and “how the stories we tell on stage influence our communities and people around us, using art for empowerment.”

“I feel like the social discourse we’ve had over the past two years and the ways that culture has been shifting has definitely influenced how I see dance and dances role in that. “I’m inspired to keep moving and keep digging and working with people I admire and respect.”
Begun will be dancing alongside Flatbush local Amar Smalls, for whom it will be the second season with Ailey II.

Smalls, a self-described “late bloomer” for starting dance at 13, says the past couple of years have really put into perspective for him how important theater is for its audiences. “There was a lot going on at once and theater is a place to escape that,” he says, adding “It makes me want to dance harder on stage and bring more of a light heartfelt feeling to let people escape that reality.” That feeling he gets while being on-stage? “Like I’m being shocked by eight million watts of electricity, my adrenaline is like on ten all the time.

“It’s exciting, it feels like you’re a superhero, otherworldly or something.” Smalls says he was first drawn to dance by the athleticism of it, and the feeling of flying through the air had him hooked.

Mixing the culture of Brooklyn with his ballet training gave him “a sort of rugged style, it’s a huge juxtaposition,” he says, adding an ultimate goal of his as a dancer it to make concert dance more mainstream for kids in the neighborhoods he grew up in.

“It was kind of hard because coming from here you only have two paths that they want you to go on if your Black and in the arts, you know like ‘I wanna be a basketball player or a rapper.’ “Going to ballet class every day was not normal at all, but it fueled me because I was the only person that was doing it and I’ve always wanted to be an outlier and not blend in.”

For more information on show times and tickets for Ailey II, click here.
Francesca Harper is Changing the Trajectory of The Ailey II Company New York

By: Audrey J Bernard

February 17, 2022

Francesca Harper, internationally renowned performer, choreographer, and artistic director, has changed the trajectory of The Ailey II Company. Her leadership has transformed the company, formerly known as Alvin Ailey II, founded in 1974 by Alvin Ailey, into a major force in contemporary dance. Harper, who is also a professor at Barnard College, has been instrumental in guiding The Ailey II Company to new heights.

Harper has been a driving force behind the company's growth and development. She has brought in new talent and ideas, and has worked to expand the company's reach both in the United States and internationally. She has also been a strong advocate for the arts and for the importance of diversity in the world of dance.

As artistic director of The Ailey II Company, Harper has been responsible for selecting and developing new works, as well as for managing the company's finances and operations. She has been a recording artist, and has also been involved in the teaching of dance.

Harper has been the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and a fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She has also been a member of the steering committee of the American Dance Festival.

The Ailey II Company is a part of The Ailey Family of Companies, which includes The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and the Alvin Ailey Foundation. The company is based in New York City, and is committed to the development of new artists and the presentation of contemporary dance.
Ailey II brings ‘exuberance’ to dance

By: Eva Thomas
February 10, 2022 (Online 2/9/22)

By EVA THOMAS
Staff Reporter

This Valentine’s Day the world-renowned Ailey II is coming back for their third performance in Telluride. Ailey II is the second company from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York City. The company consists of 12 young dancers from across North America. The performance will be held on Feb. 14 at the Palm Theatre.

“Ailey II is a lovely, energetic dance company, and their exuberance is evident in every piece,” said managing director of Palm Arts Kathy Jepson.

The two-hour performance is made up of five separate pieces, including Psukhe (2019), Searchlight (2021), Takademe (1999), Enemy in the Figure (1989), and Freedom Series.

Ailey II, first known as the “Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble,” was created in 1974 to bridge the professional dance world and The Ailey School. Alvin Ailey started the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1958. The company included Ailey and a group of young black modern dancers. Ailey was a dancer, choreographer, and activist.

According to AlvinAiley.org, “he founded Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to carry out his vision of a company dedicated to enriching the American modern dance heritage and preserving the uniqueness of the African-American cultural experience.”

Ailey then founded what is now known as the Ailey School in 1969.

Artistic director Francesca Harper will lead Monday’s performance. Hired in September 2021, this will be Harper’s first season as Ailey II’s artistic director. A multi-disciplinary artist, choreographer, director, and performer, Harper hopes to bring Ailey’s legacy and vision into the performance.

“Alley II’s mission lies in generating space for human narratives expressed through the strength, grace, and versatility of the next generation of gifted young dancers. As exemplified in this year’s diverse repertory, I am looking forward to bringing in new choreographic voices and programming works that further an ongoing cultural dialogue and contribute to social transformation,” said Harper in a Feb. 2 press release from Palm Arts.

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Francesca Harper named artistic director of Ailey II
By: Zita Allen
September 30, 2021

Ask Francesca Harper how she felt when Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Artistic Director Robert Battle announced her appointment as artistic director of Ailey II, that internationally renowned AAADT’s acclaimed troupe of young talented dancers and she gushes with excitement declaring, “It’s kind of surreal.” Yet, in many ways the appointment seems a natural step in a rather remarkable career, as well as a promising beginning of a critically acclaimed dance company’s next chapter, and last but not least, as a perfect example of the circle of life.

Harper’s appointment opens the next chapter of Ailey II as it prepares for a much-anticipated return to live performances with the kickoff of its 2021-2022 season, beginning in December with participation in the AAADT’s annual New York City Center season. The Ailey II dancers will join the AAADT for the performance of Ailey’s classic “Memoria,” the tribute to Ailey colleague, dancer and master teacher Joyce Trisler. Then without skipping a beat Ailey II kicks off a busy 2022 with its own New York season March 23-April 3 at the Ailey Citigroup Theater along with a U.S. Tour. (THE TOUR IS BEFORE AND AFTER THE U.S. SEASON)

During a recent interview, Harper’s enthusiasm clearly communicated the energy of an artist ready to hit the ground running a quality the AAADT search committee must have found compelling after what AAADT Artistic Director Robert Battle said was, “an exhaustive international search done by a firm. We wanted to make sure we had a wide variety of people who we may not have thought of. There were so many great candidates but at the end of the day, we made the right choice for the right time. She came equipped.”

In fact, so many aspects of Harper’s biography makes this appointment feel like a homecoming. In fact, Battle mentioned that the multi-talented Harper not only trained at the Ailey School before embarking on an extraordinarily successful professional career in dance, but regularly returned to teach and choreograph. What’s more, in addition to being “charismatic, caring and utterly brilliant,” Battle noted, “She knew Mr. Ailey and drew inspiration as a dancer from Ms. Jamison. And 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.”

Ailey II is an artistically important part of the Ailey vision, says former Ailey dancer Sylvia Waters who served as that company’s first artistic director for 38 years after Mr. Ailey entrusted her with this smaller troupe designed to serve, among other things, as “a performance vehicle for the gifted and talented dancers of the Ailey School to teach them what it was to be in a company.” It’s done such a successful job of training future dancers that many Ailey II dancers have gone on to join the main company, AAADT, and many choreographers whose works were presented by the second company have gone on to create dances on the first company.

Battle’s excitement about the choice of Francesca Harper to head this important artistic entity is underscored by a resume that he and Bennett Rink, executive director of the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, found impressive to say the least. The multi-talented, multi-discipline Harper has had an impressive career as a dancer, choreographer, singer, actor, director, producer and teacher both in America and in Europe. She grew up surrounded by dance greats studying at the Ailey School, becoming a soloist with the Dance Theatre of Harlem under the direction of Arthur Mitchell, choreographed works for both of the Ailey professional companies and DTH, 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 Ballet Frankfurt, under choreographer William Forsythe, 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.
It is this last point, Harper says, that makes her appointment of Ailey II feel like life coming full circle.

“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.”

Describing her reaction upon learning of her appointment, Harper says, “It just felt like everything was in alignment. “The moment that everything fell into place there was something that I was embodying,” she said recalling her as a little girl visiting her mother in her own office as head of The Ailey School. Fast forward to today, Harper said, “I thought about the moment that I’m there working in the building again and my daughter comes in to hang out with me and sees my mother’s picture on the 2nd floor and then I think about all we’ve been through and the movement we’ve all been through,” Harper says referring to both her family’s involvement in the early Civil Rights Movement and the current the Black Lives Matter movement and the heightened awareness of the need for diversity, equity and inclusion, for Blacks and for women, and the Ailey organization’s own legacy of art reflective of the cares and concerns of the world we inhabit. Harper says of her new appointment, “It feels so much bigger than me.”

Ms. Harper and the Ailey organization are also announced the appointment of 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, a reputation that will only be enhanced by Harper’s appointment.