

Ailey II director prepares for one of her last shows

By Sarah Lagan
1/20/2012

FRIDAY, JAN. 20: Sylvia Waters had no intention of leading a dance company but the legendary Alvin Ailey saw a passion in her that he would not allow the world to pass by.

Some 35 years ago, the late American choreographer and activist invited Waters to launch Ailey II — the junior company to his school and it has since has grown into an international success story. Artistic director Waters has never looked back and islanders and visitors alike will have the chance to see the fruit of her work as part of the Bermuda Festival of the Performing Arts this month. What's more, it's one of the last chances they will see the dancers under her direction as she plans to retire in June of this year. The company will perform at the Ruth Seaton James Centre on January 23 and 24 at 8pm.

Ailey II is known for “merging the spirit and energy of America’s best young dance talent with the passion and creative vision of today’s more outstanding emerging choreographers.” Since its inception in 1974 it is one of the most popular dance companies in the country and combines a lively touring schedule with extensive outreach programmes.

“It’s been a great journey,” the Julliard graduate told the *Bermuda Sun*. “I keep asking myself why Alvin chose me — to me it was an honour and a privilege. At first it was terrifying because I had no plans of being a director of a company or anything like that.

“The company was very close and I guess he saw in me a certain leadership and felt I had an eye for talent. I wanted to work with younger artists — it was something I always had as a young artist — that mentorship — but it didn’t exist as a second company. It was something very close to me and I guess maybe he felt that.”

When it first launched, the company’s aim was to train dancers to help them make the transition from the class to the stage. They performed outreach workshops for community members for whom dance was inaccessible such as senior citizens, people who were incarcerated and children in hospital.

Touring

Ailey II then started forming its own repertory and was invited to tour in the US. It was then it officially moved



Artistic: Ailey II dancers. *Photo supplied



International: Ailey II perform in Bermuda Bermuda on January 23 & 24 at the Ruth Seaton James Centre. *Photo supplied

beyond the “workshop” format. The company visited Bermuda a couple of times in the early days of its inception.

“We have produced, over the years, a very vibrant young company of dancers who are very sophisticated and professional and skilled, it’s testament to them that we have so much touring,” Waters said. “We are respected not only nationally but now internationally and the choreographers that have come through this company are just amazing. Most of them have gone on to make very successful careers — they have their own companies, they have been in Broadway shows and that also includes costume designers and lighting designers. It’s been a real laboratory for emerging artists.”

Waters has built up a reputation conducting master classes throughout Europe and the US recently lecturing at Harvard University. She received an honorary doctorate from the State University of New York, the New York Dance and Performance “Bessie” Award, the IABD Festival Legacy Award and Dance Magazine Award. Waters is responsible for selecting repertory for her dancers, making all the artistic decisions, rehearsing with them and coaching them. She says she likes to choose the most challenging of repertories for her students.

Twelve dancers will perform in Bermuda and there will be a production staff of a light designer, stage manager and wardrobe supervisor as well as Waters and her artistic director designate Troy Powell.

“It’s a blend of modern dance, classical ballet and jazz. One of Alvin’s beliefs was that he always wanted “total dance” — dancers who are equally prolific at each discipline.”

Speaking of her retirement she added: “It is emotional because it is something you build and it is something that I have enjoyed doing for so long and I feel so rooted in this.”