

Dance: Alvin Ailey is the place for Jamar

October 1, 2010
By Diane Parkes



JAMAR Roberts saw the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater perform in his home city of Miami just once – but it was enough for him to know this was the company for him.

Jamar, now aged 27, began dancing when he was just ten years old, but initially saw it as a hobby rather than a career option.

“I first started dancing when a girl who lived next door asked me to go to her class because she said they needed some guys,” he recalls. “I was naturally quite athletic and physically active and enjoyed the physical act of dancing.”

Jamar studied at the New World School of Arts in Miami and trained at the Joffrey Ballet School before joining Ailey II, the company’s young dance group, then joining AAADT in 2002.

And he knew that AAADT was his number one choice for a dancing career.

“I only saw Alvin Ailey once when they came to Miami,” Jamar says. “That was the first professional dance performance that I had seen and it had such a passion and was so emotional. That performance brought me to tears.”

“I think Alvin Ailey is very personable. The audience really relates to the work and what is taking place on stage. They relate to the character-based roles because they are very human and natural. It isn’t like watching swans on stage – although, of course, there are some really great dances with swans in!

“I am so lucky as I get to do what I love every night which is performing. I love the feel of dance, the physical element of it. Being able to perform in front of an audience with Alvin Ailey is a great gift.”

This is particularly true of the company’s signature piece Revelations which was created by Ailey in 1960 to traditional African-American spiritual music and will be performed in Birmingham.

“Revelations is a piece about lineage and about experience,” says Jamar. “It is about the African-American experience, but is also about a journey. Everyone goes on a journey in their life. It may not be from the point that Ailey created, from slavery to freedom, but we all have that experience of moving on and of being uplifted and inspired.”

At 6ft 4ins tall, Jamar says that while he enjoys a stage full of performers, he does also like the moments when he is dancing solo.

“Not everyone likes being alone on stage but I find it really liberating. Because I am quite big, I am always having to watch that I don’t bowl everyone over but when there is just me on stage I don’t have to worry about that.

“One of my favourite pieces is a new piece called In/Side which was created by Robert Battle. It is very turbulent. There is a lot of angst and it is very gritty but it is also very beautiful. For me it is a really satisfying experience doing it. I like the challenge of performing really emotional work.”

It is good news for Jamar that he does like Battle’s work as the choreographer was recently named as the next artistic director for Alvin Ailey. Due to take over from Judith Jamison next summer, Battle will be only the third artistic director at the company – the first being Alvin Ailey.

And Jamar believes Battle will bring his own spirit to the company.

“I think Alvin Ailey has made a really smart decision with Robert Battle,” says Jamar. “I think as a company we are comfortable with the work of Alvin Ailey and the umbrella of choreographers who have worked with the company. Robert Battle will bring some challenges for us all – but I am sure they will be challenges we will embrace.”

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