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Alvin Ailey's fiftieth, from the inside out

Foot in Mouth invited dancer, dance teacher, and writer **Theresa Ruth Howard** to reflect on Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's fiftieth anniversary, which the company is currently in the middle of, from the inside out. Here she is:

In history books, memoirs, and biographies, the subjects of the photographs--peering out from so very long ago--appear to readers as we have come to know them: at home in their own skin, fully formed--not as they were in that moment, in that state of becoming.

We like to imagine that we can see a glint of knowing in their eyes. Can one feel history being made? I once met Muhammad Ali in an airport and had the opportunity to sit and talk with him for about twenty minutes. Oddly undisturbed, I asked him, "Did you know then? Did you have any idea what was to come?"

As a dancer I was always fascinated with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, its founder and, of course, its dancers. I marveled at grainy photographs of Mr. Ailey in the studio with his dancers working on what might in the future be deemed a masterpiece. One has to wonder if they had any idea that they were churning the mortar for a foundation that would support fifty years of work--that with their bodies, sweat, and passion they were writing the first chapter of a legacy.

As a member of the New York dance community, I have taken class in the old, 61st Street building, wandered through the halls looking into classes, and befriended dancers, faculty members, and students. Though I was never a student or company member, the Ailey studios always felt like home--perhaps not *my* home, but at least that of a loving godparent. It was always okay to stop by unannounced, rest awhile, socialize, gossip a bit, or just hang. There was nothing like the end of the summer intensive performance, appropriately named the Summer Sizzler because the studio was so hot, you could sweat off a third of your body weight. It was always a hell (pun intended) of a show, and it always sold out!

I began teaching at the school about four years ago. It never quite dawned on me what exactly I had become a part of; I was just happy to have a gig. It was not until we moved into our new home, the glass palace on 55th Street and 9th Avenue, that it hit me: I was a part of history. The newness and the grandeur of our modern facility took many of us aback, and for a while we were lost in the space. We had to create new ways of interacting, new systems of finding and connecting with people who used to be just feet away and were now on a separate floor. Slowly and each in our own way, we grew acclimated to our new home and the palace became just our place.

Within the organization, we fringe people had been hearing rumblings about the impending fiftieth anniversary and to be prepared for a higher level of visibility. You can only imagine what that would mean in a *glass* building. The March 27th, 2008, launch of the anniversary brought the grandeur back full blast. The plans revealed that New York audiences would not have to wait until Christmas to see the company but that a season at BAM, in Brooklyn, was planned, as well as numerous Summerstage performances in several boroughs. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is marking its fiftieth the only way a dance organization could--with dance, dance, and more dance.



The first of numerous New York appearances was Ailey II at the Joyce this April. It is always a treat to see this part of the organization from the inside out, as the dancers are the harvest of the school, the physical representation of a through line. Associate director of Ailey II, Troy Powell, for example, has marked all the steps, beginning with his training at the school at age nine. He also danced in both first and second companies, and has now created for Ailey II "External Knot," which is indicative of the powerhouse work that Ailey has become known for.

Another bit of history on the Joyce stage was "When Dawn Comes..." by Christopher Huggins, who danced under Mr. Ailey. The piece brought the physically dynamic movement vocabulary and musically-infused virtuosity of Mr. Ailey's legacy to mind. The freedom and abandon with which the young dancers presented the work was refreshing, and Mr. Huggins should

be applauded for creating such meaty material for them to work with and grow through. As a footnote, two of the Ailey II dancers, Yannik Lebrun and Rachael McLaren, have just been taken into the main company.

In the first week of June, the Joyce Theater joined with the Brooklyn Academy of Music to present a best-of program at BAM that featured the athletically playful "Golden Section" from Twyla Tharp's full-length "Catherine Wheel"; Robert Battle's "Unfold," a beautifully simplified and visually entrancing duet that marks a stylistic departure from the Ailey aesthetic; and, in subtle contrast, Camille A. Brown's "Groove to Nobody's Business," a lighthearted character piece that any New York City straphanger can relate to.

"The Groove to Nobody's Business" was another homage to Mr. Ailey in his penchant for creating character-driven works that not only highlighted his dancers' technical ability but their personalities and dramatic flair as well. Marilyn Banks with her lashes, Elizabeth Roxas with her swirling mane of hair, April Berry's aquiline nose, Gary Deloche with his charismatic sex appeal, the womanly earth goddess amazons of Judith Jamison and Donna Wood--these were the characters, the personalities, that kept us on seat's edge. With a

