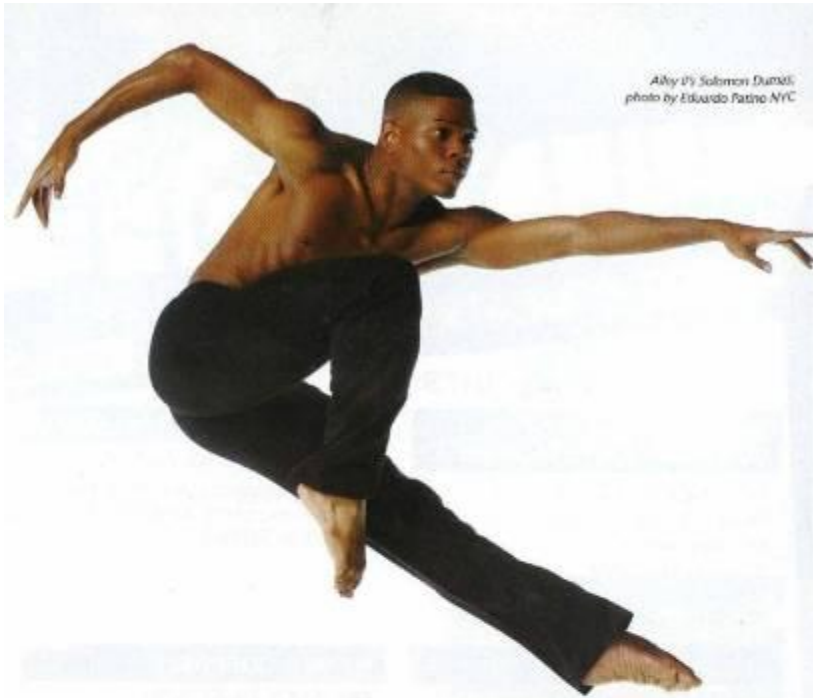


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Ailey II's Solomon Dantóni  
photo by Eduardo Fattino NYC

## City Center Opens the Door to Dance

By Susan Reiter

A lvin Ailey American Dance Theater performed 39 times in December to enthusiastic packed houses at New York City Center, but there was a special quality to the cheering with which an equally large—but significantly younger—audience responded one Thursday morning during the season. Through New York City Center's Education Department, more than 2,000 public school students, mainly from grades 4 through 12, were introduced to *Revelations* by the

dancers of Ailey II. For many, it was their first experience of a professional dance performance. And as loud and excited as their response was when the house lights dimmed, their rapt attention during the hour-long performance of Thang Dao's *Echoes* and the complete *Revelations* was a cut above most audience behavior in theaters these days.

This special student performance—a comparable event will be offered this month for Flamenco Hoy, and next month



Ailey II dancers lead a workshop at P.S. 9 in Manhattan; photo by Jerome Milder

for Paul Taylor Dance Company—is just the most visible aspect of the *Young People's Dance Series*, one of the programs offered by City Center's enterprising and busy Education Department. About half of the students attending the performance were from schools whose participation in YPDS includes a day of professional development for teachers whose students will be coming to the theater. They then join their students for enriching pre- and post-performance workshops, with a pair of the company's dancers visiting the school to introduce movement ideas and encourage the students to create their own choreography based on what they learned.

At the heart of the various programs is "the process of looking at what's on the stage—talking about it, interpreting and analyzing it, and then taking the material and doing something creative with it," explained Arlene Jordan, City Center's dynamic Director of Education since 2005. As with the expansive and imaginative programs her department offers in

conjunction with *Encores!*, YPDS aims to provide the tools and environment needed to stimulate growth, knowledge, and creative discipline in the arts.

Having worked in a New York City Department of Education district office for many years, and having created educational programs for the Roundabout Theater Company, Jordan draws on her deep familiarity with the schools to design YPDS programs. "We craft something to meet the needs of each school, according to where the kids are developmentally, where the school is financially, and what the school culture is like," Jordan said. "Also whether the kids have studied dance before, or if they're new to dance. We try to get a sense of it and build from there."

It can be a gradual process. Take P.S. 129 on West 130th Street, a new participant in YPDS, which sent students to see *Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake* in the fall (they were among some 400 students from various schools who attended a regular Wednesday performance). After-



ward, Jordan suggested to the principal, Odelphia Pierre, that "it would be great if we could go deeper and connect to the kids in a way where they're participatory. They could have close contact with the artists that grace our stage, and really hear about their unique aesthetic and culture." The school found the money in its budget to take part in the full YPDS program—not always a given in these difficult times—and sent two teachers to the next professional development workshop.

About 30 teachers participated in that workshop, which began with former leading Ailey dancer Nasha Thomas-Schmitt (now co-director of Ailey's Arts in Education & Community Programs) leading a 90-minute movement class. By the end of it this group—which ranged from dance teachers to math and history teachers—had learned a significant portion of "I've Been Buked," the opening section of *Revelations*. Next, teaching artists Susan Thomasson and Jessica Nicoll led them in an investigation of the 1930s Dust Bowl era in which Ailey grew up.

An Ailey dancer works with students at P.S. 84 in Manhattan; photo by Joseph Rodman



After viewing a video and examining books, the teachers formed small groups to create tableaux evoking an aspect of that era, and then shared and discussed them with the full group. And that was just the morning session; in the afternoon, further exploration, revision and evaluation took place.

"Unless there's some essential shift in the teachers' perception or engagement, there's no real change in the students," Thomasson observed during the lunch break. "So I think they have to go forward in tandem." The workshop is meticulously planned and each year focuses on a specific aspect of the dance being learned. "What we're looking for is a broader investigation into ways to cross over from the curriculum to a work of art and back again," Nicoll explained. "It's about researching and finding connections embodying the ideas that came out of the research—making artistic choices, letting questions lead you into further investigation and discovery."

A few weeks after the workshop,



Teachers take part in a professional development workshop; photo by Joseph Rodman

P.S. 129 teacher Roberta Hairston observed her sixth-graders as they took part in a session with two members of Ailey II—as hundreds of students citywide were doing just prior to attending the student matinee. Asked by the dancers whether they had heard of Alvin Ailey, her students gave eager responses; she'd had them read a book about him in their literacy class.

Hairston, who worked in theater before becoming a teacher, said, "I didn't have any idea what [the professional development workshop] would be like. The dancers came out, and I was just open—which is how I'd like the kids to be, open to all new experiences. A lot of them say, 'I don't want to try that; I'm afraid I won't look good, or it will be wrong.' The thing about the arts—there's no right or wrong answer."

A few days later, several of the P.S. 129 sixth-graders spoke after the student matinee about what they'd just experienced. Christian Bermeo, for whom it was

his first live dance performance, was impressed with the men's abilities to lift the women, and sensed that a particular male solo "was about slavery—he was by himself and he tried to get out of it." His classmate Nicole Garcia added, "You could see that they showed their emotions in the dances." Chyna Lynch, who studies ballet, was particularly moved by "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel" in *Revelations*. "The way they danced, it was like they were dancing for the song, and the song connected to them," she said. "Everything was connecting, and that's why the dance was just perfect."

*Susan Reiter covers dance for New York Press and contributes articles on the performing arts to the Los Angeles Times and other publications.*