

Ailey's Rushing, front and center after 2 decades

December 13, 2013

By Jocelyn Noveck

NEW YORK (AP) — When Matthew Rushing was a young boy growing up in Inglewood, Calif., his mother was concerned he might fall prey to the gang violence that plagued the area. So she signed him up for an afterschool arts program.

It kept the boy off the streets, but also did something his mother could never have predicted: It propelled him into a love affair with dance, a passion that's led him to the very pinnacle of the art form.

If you're a fan of modern dance, chances are you've seen the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, surely the most visible modern dance company in the world. If you have, chances are you've seen "Revelations," the company's defining work. And if you've seen "Revelations," you've likely seen Rushing — slowly undulating his spine in the "Wade in the Water" section, or pointing joyously skyward in the finale, "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham," both his body and face so immersed in the moment that it's difficult to look away.

Dance writer Wendy Perron has that blissful problem. "When he enters in 'Revelations,' undulating that spine, I don't want to watch anything else onstage," says Perron, editor at large at Dance Magazine and author of "Through the Eyes of a Dancer." Rushing's movement, she says, "seems to spring from him like a fountain. You can't imagine him being still."

Perron adds: "It would be almost a crime for him to stop dancing." But three years ago, Rushing almost did.

He was in his mid-30s, often a crossroads for dancers, and had been appointed rehearsal director, a step in a new direction. He felt overwhelmed by the prospect of doing both. But Judith Jamison, the troupe's famous artistic director who stepped down a year later, had other ideas.

"She was adamant about me continuing to dance," Rushing says. And so he did.

Audiences will benefit from that decision next week, when the company devotes an entire performance of its New York City Center season to honoring him. It will mark some two decades since Rushing, now 38, joined Ailey in 1992, just a few years after another crucial decision by his mother. The company was performing in Los Angeles, but the show was sold out. A ticket scalper offered two seats.



In this Monday, Dec. 2, 2013 photo, Matthew Rushing, a veteran star of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, rehearses at the company's headquarters, in New York. When Rushing was a young boy growing up in Inglewood, Calif., his mother was concerned he might fall prey to the gang violence that plagued the city. So she signed him up for an afterschool arts program. It kept the 12-year-old boy off the streets, but it also did something his mother couldn't have predicted: It propelled him into a love affair with dance, a passion that's led him to the very pinnacle of the art form. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)



"One was in the front row, and one was in the balcony," Rushing says. "My mother put me in the front. I saw 'Revelations,' and I saw 'Cry,' which seemed to be about all the women in my life. I hadn't known dance could do that — comment on my life experiences that way."

Rushing launched into learning about the company. He spent hours memorizing the biographies of top Ailey dancers, past and present — incredibly, 100 of them, he says. He'd write them out on chalkboards at school. "When I tell you I was obsessed with this company," he says, shaking his head, unable to complete the sentence. "I knew this was where I was going to be."

At 17, a senior at the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, Rushing felt ready to audition for the Ailey school in New York, but couldn't afford the airfare. So a teacher accompanied him to Berkeley, Calif., where the company was appearing. Rushing was offered a full scholarship and a spot in the junior company. A year later, he was in the main troupe.

"What I remember is someone so young, but with a desire and a seriousness about the joy of dancing," says dancer Renee Robinson, a longtime mentor. "He had a huge, passionate connection to dancing. He also — and I was surprised when I saw this — had a humorous side. I was so drawn to him when I heard him laugh."

As he rose quickly through the ranks, a journey that led to dancing before four U.S. presidents, Rushing also became deeply involved in a non-dancing activity: outreach. The company spends more than half the year touring the country and the world, and Ailey dancers often teach and perform for local youngsters.

"I love it," Rushing says. "It's part of the Ailey fabric. You're an ambassador, as well as an artist."

Gaining seniority also meant progressing through the various sections of "Revelations," a rite of passage for an Ailey dancer. It's no accident that Rushing is front and center at the end, and last to take a curtain call. He insists that despite dancing the work for more than two decades, he doesn't tire of it.

"I'm not gonna lie, when you're on tour for months and you've been dancing every night, you ARE tired of dancing," he says. "But tired of 'Revelations'? Never. Year to year, I find there's more to experience."

Rushing's ability to stay fresh and healthy comes with huge effort that perhaps only fellow dancers understand.

Most days start with a gym workout — machines, weights, swimming. That warms him up for 9 a.m. company class, which warms him up for a day of rehearsals. If he isn't performing that night, he may go back to the gym for more swimming. He also does yoga and Pilates.

"I'm dancing next to people half my age," Rushing says. "The last thing I want is to look old onstage."

But there's a deeper reason for the effort, explains Robinson, who retired last year after a 31-year Ailey career.

"You know, Matthew is one of these dancers who's been



blessed by the universe with longevity," she says, "and it's so important for the younger dancers to see it, to see that he's evolved and developed into a richer place."

It's a gift to the audience, too, she adds. "THEY experience his maturity, and it's special for them as they bring a new generation to the theater," she says. "They tell their kids, 'Wait 'til you see Matthew Rushing.'"

Of many experiences Rushing has had as a top Ailey dancer, one is very personal. About seven years ago, his father, who had left the family home when Matthew was young, appeared unannounced at a performance. It was their first meeting in 15 years. "He was very supportive," Rushing says of the happy reunion.

Though inevitably, one day, Rushing will stop dancing, he professes to have no idea when.

"I'm just listening to my body," he says. "But you know, when the time comes, I'll be happy, because I've been so fulfilled. I really couldn't ask for anything more."

Will he become a choreographer — something he's dabbled in, but admits he isn't yet comfortable with — or even a company director? Rushing laughs off such predictions. "The best thing for me is to take it one day at a time," he says. "But this company is my life and my home. I have no desire to be anywhere else." Most Ailey fans would agree.

"Every time I see him perform, I think, this is what it's like to be born to dance," says Perron, the dance writer. "This is a human being doing what he is meant to do."

