

The New York Times

Front Page in Print Edition
December 25, 2013

With Willing Spirit, a Reprise for Ailey Dancers

By SARAH LYALL

The voice on the phone belonged to Masazumi Chaya, the associate artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and he had a startling proposition. Would she — Elizabeth Roxas-Dobrish, 55 years old, former Ailey superstar and current artificial-hip owner — come out of retirement to dance at a special performance on New Year's Eve? "Are you kidding me?" she responded.

No, he was not kidding, and eventually the answer was yes, she would do it. And it was yes, too, for a handful of other Ailey alumni who received similar calls, among them Linda-Denise

Fisher-Harrell, 43, who teaches dance in Maryland; Dudley Williams, 75, who joined the company in 1964 and remained for 31 years; and Donna Wood Sanders, 59, who has spent the last 20 years raising a family in the Westchester suburbs.

It could almost be a plot from one of those movies in which legendarily gifted jewel thieves or grizzled special-forces assassins are lured out of retirement for one last impossible heist or against-the-odds mission. But this is different, more of a reckoning, a coming to grips with the passage of time. "Revelations," a classic of American modern dance set to gospel music and spirituals, is Ailey's best-known and most-performed dance, a

thread through the history of the company and a work every Ailey dancer knows intimately. "It's in my DNA," Ms. Fisher-Harrell said by telephone. "Even if I wanted to forget it, I couldn't."

But knowing how to do something doesn't mean being able to do it the same way you did it before. The dancers spoke of thinking one thing in their heads but having something else, perhaps, happen in their limbs. "Does the body do what it did when it was 20?" Ms. Fisher-Harrell said. "Maybe not."

Ms. Roxas-Dobrish, who left the company 15 years ago, was assigned a particularly difficult portion of the piece, a pas de deux set to the music of the spir-

Continued on Page A3



ANDREA MOFFIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Elizabeth Roxas-Dobrish, 55, a former member of the Ailey company, rehearsing "Revelations" with Jamar Roberts, a current dancer. She and other alumni will perform on New Year's Eve.

Inside The Times

QUOTATION OF THE DAY

“When you’re younger, you have everything — you have the flexibility, you have no fear. But you don’t savor every step, every movement of every fingertip, every beat of the music. I feel like I’m tasting food for the first time.”

ELIZABETH ROXAS-DOBRISH,
on dancing Alvin Ailey’s “Revelations” again at age 55. [A3]

With Willing Spirit, Reprise for Former Ailey Dancers

From Page A1

itual hymn "Fix Me, Jesus." She was suffused by doubt. Her hip-replacement surgery had taken place at the end of 2012. "I also don't have any A.C.L. in both of my knees," she blurted suddenly about the state of her ligaments, almost as an aside, in a post-rehearsal interview. The veterans' one-time performance Tuesday at New York City Center (where the company is in residence through Jan. 5) begins at 7 p.m.

So she got to work. She enlisted the help of a physical therapist, a massage therapist and an acupuncturist; she tweaked her diet; she stepped up her Pilates; and she started going to class again. She began to see the dance from a new perspective, not just as a showcase for technique but as an expression of "all the things that life has put into you."

And no, she said, she cannot do it exactly the same way she did when she was young: when she arches her back toward the floor while balancing on one leg and extending the other high into the air in one especially hard movement, for instance, she cannot bend back as far as she once did. "Alvin always said, 'Ponytail to the floor,'" she said. "That's not going to happen."

She added: "When you're younger, you have everything — you have the flexibility, you have no fear. But you don't savor every step, every movement of every fingertip, every beat of the music. I feel like I'm tasting food for the first time."

Ms. Roxas-Dobrish, who after retirement worked briefly as a real-estate agent ("It was the most horrible feeling I ever felt"), now teaches at the Ailey School. By contrast, Ms. Wood, who uses her maiden name professionally, has truly been away. Retiring in 1985 after 13 years at Ailey, she moved to New Rochelle, married, had children. She was lured back,



JACK MITCHELL

Elizabeth Roxas-Dobrish with Andre Tyson in "Revelations" during her years with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

she said, because Mr. Chaya pointed out that her two sons had never seen her dance.

"For years I've focused on family, children and community," she said. "I thought this would be a one-time thing, a chance for my children to see me perform."

She went on a diet and increased her exercise regimen, and then took a big gulp and showed up for classes with members of the current company. She wore gym clothes and socks. "I am not putting on a leotard," she said. (She has been cast in a section of the dance known as the

"yellow" section, for the flowing dresses the dancers wear.) Still, she said, being in the building took her breath away.

Ms. Fisher-Harrell, who teaches at Towson University, has returned several times to the Ailey company since she retired, and still performs. She stays in great shape, and said that age — for a dancer, 43 counts as old — had its benefits.

"At a young age, you look at it physically: how can I do these steps, how can I bend back further, how my leg can go up higher?" she said. "But the older you

get, the more you're comfortable with yourself. I know where I stand and how I feel."

Robert Battle, Ailey's artistic director, said the dancers were of course being held to a high standard, but the spirit was just as important as relative perfection. "Maybe they might feel that they can't do it exactly the way they did, but maybe that's not the point," he said. "The point is to be where they are."

At the rehearsal the other day, the petite Ms. Roxas-Dobrish danced with her partner — Jamar Roberts, 6 feet 4¼ inches tall and 31 years old — for the first time. The "Fix Me, Jesus" portion is intimate and grueling, requiring the woman to push her body to extremes and put absolute trust in her partner.

Afterward she said she felt an immediate connection — "The dance just kind of flowed," she said — but she worried that Mr. Roberts would feel he was "dancing with his grandma."

Not at all, he said in a telephone interview. "I felt like I needed to be delicate, but not because I thought she was old, but because she really is a jewel," he said. "She's legendary. I didn't want to do anything or say anything that would make it a bad experience for her."

He said that before Ms. Roxas-Dobrish, he had never danced this piece with a partner who looked him directly in the eye.

"It wasn't flirtatious, it felt a bit" — he paused — "wild, and it opened up a new dimension of the work to me that I want to explore. I was a little taken aback."

The dancers said it was hard not to be wistful about the past when you are reminded of the person you once were. But while you give up some things as you grow older, so you gain others.

"Do I admire those bodies?" asked Ms. Wood, speaking of the young dancers in the current company. "Absolutely. But I know who I am."

Video feature: [Returning to the Stage, at 55](#): A former Ailey superstar, Elizabeth Roxas-Dobrish, returns to the stage to perform "Revelations," the company's best-known work.