

After 50 years, Alvin Ailey troupe continues to dance into Boston audiences' hearts

By Keith Powers/For The Patriot Ledger

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Love affairs don't last. Which makes the 50-year romance between the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and the city of Boston all the more special.

This relationship began in 1968 when Walter Pierce, executive director of the Celebrity Series, brought a New York modern dance troupe to the John Hancock Hall for one evening. Nobody involved in that presentation could possibly have imagined the five decades that followed, decades that have included not only annual Celebrity Series performances, but have also spun off important social organizations, dance institutes, workshops and training — for all ages.

“More than any other artist ensemble in our 80-year history, Ailey speaks to the connection between the stage and the audience,” said Gary Dunning, Celebrity Series president and executive director.

“We see families attending. We see parents taking kids. We see grandparents taking kids,” Dunning said. “As I see it passing down from generation to generation, it has a lot to say about that organization. It's a rare statement.”

It's a rare organization. Most dance troupes fade into the past when their choreographer dies. After Ailey's death in 1989, his troupe has continued to tour, expanded its social focus, and found not just one new, dynamic director — Judith Jamison — but a second, the current artistic director, Robert Battle.

The upcoming performances, scheduled for the Boch Center Wang Theater March 22 through 25, are only part of the celebration. A December symposium revisited the legacy of Ailey's first performance and the impact of his friend and colleague Emma Lewis, herself a monumental cultural force in Boston. A February workshop, open to all ages, taught children and seniors the basic moves to Ailey's “Revelations,” his signature work that will once again close the upcoming performances.

Founder of the dance and social network OrigiNation, Shaumba-Yandje Dibinga, who trained and worked with the Ailey company, played a role in both events, and can speak about Ailey's impact on Boston with an authority that few possess.

She studied and danced with his troupe, and then founded OrigNation, which expands on the reach of dance to include self-empowerment, nutrition, education and cultural history programs in neighborhoods in Dorchester, Roxbury and Mattapan. The organization reaches more than 5,000 students each year.

“Ailey’s idea was that dance came from the people and should be given back to the people,” Dibinga said. “It’s amazing to me to watch 5-, 6-, 7-year-olds, learning about Ailey and ‘Revelations,’ and then racing out to the theater to see him in the spring.

“Ailey is bigger now than what even he imagined,” Dibinga said of the current troupe. “It’s a different spirit, but it’s almost as if they took his blood memories to create something new.”

The upcoming five performances all close with “Revelations,” but include a variety of new dances and diverse choreographers — a characteristic of Battle’s shift in leadership. Works by Battle himself, and Twyla Tharp, Talley Beatty, Gustavo Ramírez Sansano and Jamar Roberts are included in the repertory, set to music by Ella Fitzgerald, Nina Simone, John Coltrane and others.

“I’m looking forward to see the Ailey company growing even more,” Dibinga said. “You can change the instructors, or change the dancers, but the feeling of love is always embedded in the organization.

“I love the fact that they are diverse. Diverse in shapes and sizes, and inclusive — gay, straight, thick or thin. They go into schools and create and make kids dance. They come from a true place and will last for a very long time.”

IF YOU GO

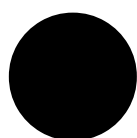
WHAT: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

WHEN: March 22-25

WHERE: Boch Center Wang Theater, 270 Tremont St., Boston

TICKETS: \$35-\$85

INFO: 617-482-6661; celebrityseries.org



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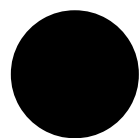
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