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[Spotlight Gets Brighter For an Ailey Dancer](#)

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Jacquelin Harris is expanding her repertoire, with role debuts in store for the latest season.

By SIOBHAN BURKE

During a recent free hour after her morning class, before afternoon rehearsals and an evening performance, the dancer Jacquelin Harris was brushing up on some familiar material. It was the third day of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's season at New York City Center, 27 shows in three and a half weeks — a marathon, as always, for the troupe's 31 dancers.

Harris, who joined the company in 2014, had been expecting to perform in Alvin Ailey's "Pas de Duke" — originally a star vehicle for Judith Jamison and Mikhail Baryshnikov — in mid-December. But she had been summoned into the role earlier to replace

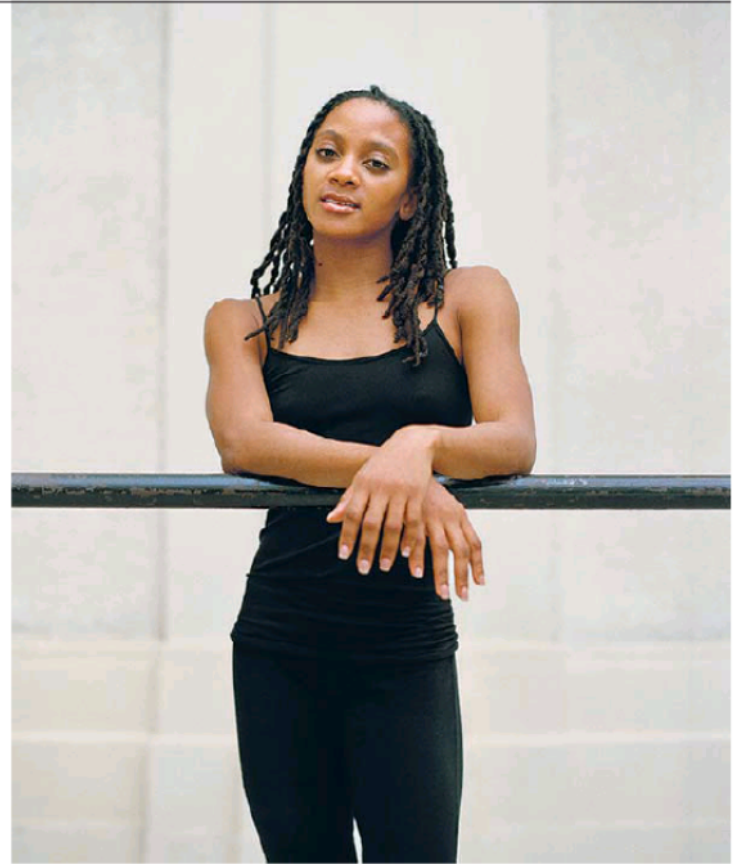
an injured colleague.

Fortunately, she already knew it inside and out. To the effervescent horns of the Duke Ellington music, she swept across a City Center studio with bladelike leaping turns. As if buoyed by a gust of air, her body sprang into a layout, one leg kicking up as her torso arched back ecstatically. When Matthew Rushing, Ailey's associate artistic director, asked her to repeat one step, she anticipated his feedback, applying it before he even said it out loud.

"You took my note; you knew the note!" Rushing said, and they both burst into laughter. He offered a few other suggestions by way of fine-tuning, or, as he put it, "I'm being petty because it's so great." The coaching session ended 20 minutes early.

At 30, and with a decade of Ailey experience behind her, Harris has emerged as a quietly confident, eminently capable star

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Jacquelin Harris joined Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 2014.

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among the company's current roster, a dancer of transfixing technical ability and ever-deepening expressive range. She is as grounded as she is electrifying, whether shape-shifting under a disco ball in Azuere Barton's "Busk" or leading the solemn, prayerful opening section of the classic "Revelations."

"She's a little bit unflappable," Robert Battle, the Ailey company's artistic director, said in an interview. "I used to say: 'Does she know how to get tired? Run out of breath onstage?' It's amazing, it really is."

He recalled seeing Harris years ago in Ailey II, where she was a member before joining the main company, "and immediately gravitating to her energy, her vibe — her sense of seeming carefree, yet like a missile," he said. "She's direct in the movement. You know exactly what she wants you to see, and that takes a lot of control. She's a natural."

This season, Harris expands her repertoire with several new roles. Her current schedule includes debuts in Twyla Tharp's exuberant "Roy's Joys," a company premiere opening on Friday; Kyle Abraham's "Are You in Your Feelings?," a new piece fueled by a hip-hop, soul and R&B playlist; and Paul Taylor's pared-down "Duet." If you've seen Ailey ads around town, you might recognize Harris as this year's poster girl, gesturing skyward and wrapped in gold.

But her steady, ready-for-anything disposition has also taken her beyond the Ailey fold. Over the past few years, she has been a standout in projects of the Merce Cunningham Trust — most notably "Night of 100 Solos," the multicity event honoring what would have been Cunningham's 100th birthday — and in two programs of Tharp's choreography at City Center, as part of a cast of ballet and modern-dance luminaries hand-picked by Tharp.

"She's one of the finest dancers in New York right now," said Patricia Lent, the Cunningham Trust's licensing director, who worked closely with Harris in preparation for "Night of 100 Solos." That was Harris's first journey into Cunningham's convoluted movement, but you wouldn't have known it, Lent said: "She inhabited the work like it was just waiting for her."

"She does everything accurately and clearly — she does what she's taught to do," Lent added. "But then she finds places within the work to push it and extend it, in a way that people who have worked with Merce for a very long time have learned to do."



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PAUL KOLNER

Left, Jacquelin Harris, the literal poster girl for the Ailey dance company. Below left, from left, Harris with James Gilmer and Chalvar Monteiro in "Roy's Joys."

Bachelor of Fine Arts program between the Ailey School and Fordham University.

Adept with numbers, she began pursuing a double major in dance and mathematics. Her touring schedule with Ailey II, which she joined in her senior year, prevented her from completing all the courses for her math degree. But, Battle said, her numerical inclinations still show up in the studio, especially when it comes to deciphering complex music.

"She has this wonderful mathematical mind, and I think she applies that as she receives information," Battle said. "You watch her figure it out, almost like a Rubik's cube." When she's presented with an unpredictable rhythmic pattern, he said, "her eyes light up." (During the depths of the pandemic, Harris passed the time taking a free online course about quantum physics, she said; she also loves a good jigsaw puzzle.)

More challenging for Harris is what she called "an element of character work that we do a lot here, where you have to pull something outside of yourself and bring it into the work, to take it to that next level." Mining that kind of motivation, she said, "to the point where it projects onstage, and shows through my body — that takes more exploration, which keeps it interesting."

If anyone can stretch a dancer of unassailable skill to new heights, it's the exacting Tharp. "I love working with Twyla," Harris said. "If everything permits, I'll work for her as many times as she calls me."

In both of her projects with Tharp outside the Ailey company, Harris has performed with her fellow Ailey dancer James Gilmer: last year in "Second Duet," a work of uncompromising physical demands and mutually heroic partnering, and this year in the scintillating "Softly as I Leave You," from "Nine Sinatra Songs," which also requires extreme trust between partners.

As Harris's other half in these works, Gilmer has been drawn to her fearlessness onstage, "the abandonment in her dancing," he said. In "Softly," which the two reprised at the Ailey gala this year, "she just goes for it every time and trusts me so much. We rock it out, and it's really fun."

Harris is now in the process of learning Ailey's celebrated "Cry," a solo that's something of a rite of passage for women in the company, dedicated to "all Black women everywhere — especially our mothers." And while she doesn't plan to retire anytime soon, she is laying the groundwork for when that day comes. In January, she'll begin remote courses in a program of Columbia University's nursing school, which offers prerequisites for degrees in various health professions.

Still, she's staying curious and open about where her path could lead.

"Maybe I'll start learning microbiology," she said, "and decide I want to go do something completely different."

To an extent, Harris, who has a reserved but assured demeanor, recognizes a certain facility within herself: the effortlessness that some of her colleagues speak of. In an interview at the Ailey headquarters in Midtown, between rehearsal sessions, she reflected on the perception that she easily picks up new material.

"I feel like my body can naturally do" — she said before pausing to consider her words, placing both hands on her torso and smiling, as if in gratitude. "My body holds me down."

Harris, who is from Charlotte, N.C., took her first dance class when she was just 2. She trained for competitions (and for fun) at a local studio, Dance Productions, then moved to New York to study in the joint