

MIAMI DANCER ONE OF AILEY II'S 'NEXT GENERATION OF DANCE'

By: Sean Erwin
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Miami ties run deep in the storied New York City-based Ailey II, the second company of the world-renowned Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Ailey luminaries like current artistic director and choreographer, Robert Battle, and 2016 Bessie Award winner, Ailey dancer and choreographer, Jamar Roberts, both hail from Miami. Now in his first year, Ailey II dancer, Andrew Bryant, joins Battle and Roberts in calling both Miami and Ailey's Manhattan studios "home." He'll perform with Ailey II at the Adrienne Arsht Center's Knight Concert Hall on Saturday, Feb. 25 in its program, "The Next Generation of Dance."

When asked how growing up in Miami prepared him for his career in dance, Bryant says that his first inspiration came while he was attending Norland Middle School in Miami Gardens. He recalls watching his older brother, Shaquille Braham, dancing for Miami icon Traci Young-Byron. "I went to his show and saw him alongside (dancer) Keenan Washington," says Bryant. "I was so inspired by the way (Washington) performed each piece. His length, musicality, and overall swag he possessed in each ballet left me in awe."

The experience inspired Bryant to audition for the Miami Northwestern Performing and Visual Arts Center under the direction of Byron. Bryant also went on to perform in Byron's Miami-based company, Young Contemporary Dance Company. The Ailey II company appeared on his radar while Bryant was still a sophomore at Towson University outside Baltimore. "I originally went to Howard University for my freshmen year of college," he says. "In search of new scenery and a different way to approach dance, I auditioned for Towson University where I met former Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater member Linda Denise Fisher-Harrell who introduced me to Ailey II."

He says his relationship with Ailey II was born out of his time at Towson. "They had a partnership with the university and would visit every year to do technical rehearsals for their upcoming tour," says Bryant. "There I would get invited to sit in on rehearsals, take classes, and get mentorship from the artistic directors." Earning his bachelor of fine arts degree from Towson, Bryant enrolled at The Ailey School where he studied for the next three years performing works by Alvin Ailey, Bradley Shriver, and Rebecca Margolick before receiving this year's invite to join Ailey II. Bryant says that having the chance to be a company member of Ailey II has been life-changing. "Being in Ailey II has forced me to make a lot of life changes for the better," says Bryant. "It's allowed me to

be more organized, to eat healthier, be more expressive, and to also embrace love and change in any situation."

Founded in 1974 as the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble, Ailey II has emerged as a training ground for up-and-coming dancers, pairing fresh talent with cutting-edge choreographers. In the process, Ailey II has earned critical acclaim for showcasing a high-energy and diverse repertoire. In her second year as artistic director of Ailey II, Francesca Harper's basically grew up with the company. Born in Chicago and raised in New York City, her mother, Denise Jefferson directed The Ailey School from 1984 to 2010. Harper admits her history with the company makes her current role feel surreal.

Miller, the current artistic director of Brooklyn-based company, GALLIM Dance, took the title for the work from the Greek word for "soul." Miller became the first choreographer ever to be named the Choreographer-in-Residence for the

Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2017. Created for the Ailey company, the current version of the work is a revamp of the original and features new lighting and new costuming designed by Elias Gurrola.

For Harper, Miller's work is a natural fit with this year's program. "Andrea is a risk taker as well," explains Harper. "Her movement is very physical and imaginative and so many aspects of the movement embody the new vision of the company." And for Bryant, Miller's choreography makes him think big. "When I think of Andrea Miller's ballet Psükhe, the words 'sensual, godly, larger than life' come to mind to describe the ballet." Bryant says working with Harper has been nothing short of amazing. "She's really pushing us to be bigger than ourselves artistically and intellectually. The new vision she has for Ailey II really shines bright in each and every rehearsal, and that truly propels us to reach new heights," he says.

WHAT: Ailey II's "The Next Generation of Dance"

WHEN: 8 p.m., Saturday, Feb. 25.

WHERE: Knight Concert Hall, Adrienne Arsht Center of the Performing Arts, 1300 Biscayne Boulevard, Miami

COST: \$30, \$45, \$55, \$65

INFORMATION: 305-949-6722 and arshtcenter.org

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