

Hartford Courant

Legendary African American dance company returns to CT with dances featuring Chuck Berry and beyond

By: Christopher Arnott
October 13, 2025

Legendary African American dance company touring CT with works featuring 'The Matrix' and beyond

By Christopher Arnott
Hartford Courant

Ailey II is a national treasure, one of just a handful of touring dance companies with the versatility, efficiency, malleability and bedrock creativity to work on a wide variety of stages and efficiently bring cutting-edge modern dance works to the masses.

Many different Connecticut theaters have hosted Ailey II over the years, including the Westport Country Playhouse this past May. This week, Ailey II is bringing two different dance programs to two different Connecticut theaters: the Warner Theatre in Torrington on Oct. 17 and the Shubert Theatre in New Haven on Oct. 18.

The main Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater troupe also tours on occasion, but Ailey II only tours. Ailey II was founded in 1974 as a second Ailey company specifically intended to help promising young dancers transition to professional careers. The company has only a dozen members, each of whom stay with Ailey II for only two years. During that time, dancers can tour the country performing a wide variety of new works by some of the most important choreographers of the 21st century.

In 2021, Francesa Harper, who had known Ailey and Sylvia Waters since she was a child and whose mother was a longtime teacher at The Ailey School, became Ailey II's third artistic director. She follows Waters, who'd been a principal dancer with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Waters became Ailey II's artistic director a year after the company was formed and led it for 38 years. She was followed by Troy Powell, who led Ailey II from 2012 to 2020.

Ailey II began as a more experimental dance company, and Harper has maintained the commitment to new works. Nearly all the pieces being done in Connecticut this week premiered on this tour. The others are restagings of important works from the company's history.

"One of my objectives was legacy shaping the future," Harper said of the deft mix of classics and premieres. "It's so beautiful for me to examine Mr.

Ailey's works. There's a sense of identity and voice that lives within him and Sylvia Waters."

She remembers from her time as an Ailey School student that Ailey "would wander the halls in his jeans and socks, asking us how we were feeling that day and whether we'd done our homework. He made everyone feel important. You could feel Mr. Ailey deliberately empowering us, making us feel seen."

At the Warner Theatre, Ailey II will dance "Streams," a piece from 1970 choreographed by Ailey himself to music by Miloslav Kabelac and described as "an abstract exploration of bodies in space"; "Down the Rabbit Hole," inspired by "The Matrix" movies and exploring the interaction between humans and machines with a score by Johannes Goldbach and the electronic sound artist Pomassl; and Harper's own choreographic tribute to the Ailey II company, "Luminous," featuring an original score by R&B/soul legend Nona Hendryx.

At the Shubert Theatre, Ailey II will dance to choreographer Chavar Monteiro's "Berry Dreamin'," charting the rise of proto-rock 'n' roller Chuck Berry using Berry's own classic hits as well as tweaked samples and other variations of his work; "Divining," Judith Jami-



Ailey II's Jada Ammons, from left, Kamani Abu and Adanna Smalls in Renée I. McDonald's "Likes vs. Life," part of the program at the Shubert Theatre in New Haven on Oct. 18. The company performs a different program at the Warner Theatre in Torrington on Oct. 17. NIR ARIELI PHOTOS

The Ailey II dance company performs choreographer Chavar Monteiro's "Berry Dreamin'," scored with rock 'n' roll classics by Chuck Berry.

son's breakthrough success as a choreographer where, to quote the company, "African polyrhythms lend the work an air of mystery and mysticism" that "builds on a variety of dance idioms from throughout Africa to create a pulsating, strikingly modern work," with music by Kimati Dinizulu and Monti Ellison; Renée I. McDonald's "Likes vs. Life" for three dancers to a musical score drawing from many sources, examining social problems like bully, schadenfreude and anxiety which can emanate from social media; and the coming-of-age themed dance "In Session" by choreographer Rena Butler with music by

Darryl J. Hoffman, which the company describes as a rhythmic, physicalized "nuanced journey of self-discovery within a community."

Harper remembers seeing "Streams" performed by Ailey II "when I was a child, when Sylvia was in it." She also saw the 1984 world premiere of Jami-son's "Divining." Jami-son had been a principal dancer in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company in the 1960s and '70s, was considered Ailey's muse and ended up as his successor in the company. "She was worried about it. Before he passed and she had taken over

the company, Mr. Ailey convinced her to do it and it was such a showstopper. Seeing this powerful woman onstage sharing her wisdom and mysticism and power made such an impression on me."

Serving as artistic director and revisiting the work of such influential forebears is an opportunity to "embody everybody's stories and integrate them into our work," Harper said. "It's a repertory company. The thing about Alvin Ailey is that he invited people in and created work with them. It wasn't all about him."

Harper said the COVID pandemic was hard for dance companies, who

not only couldn't perform but had trouble rehearsing. Even exercising at a gym could be difficult. The company came roaring back and is now touring incessantly again.

"Something seems to have turned in the last couple of years," Harper said. "We're seeing bigger audiences, and they're excited to have us." Harper said she sees a special energy in the dancers as well. "Some of them will be in the studio working for hours before a scheduled rehearsal, or in the gym at 5 a.m. when we're on tour. They know they will only be in Ailey II for two years, and they are maximizing their time with us."

Harper joins the company on tour and sees that element as being a big part of the glory of Ailey II.

"Touring is interesting and transformative," Harper said. "We meet all these different audiences. We were just in Jasper, Indiana, and they were so happy to see us. There are such lovely people around everywhere we go, grateful to seeing the dance."

Ailey II performs on Oct. 17 at 7:30 p.m. at Warner Theatre's Oreglia Auditorium, 68 Main St., Torrington (\$46-\$78, warnertheatre.org) then on Oct. 18 at 7 p.m. at the Shubert Theatre, 247 College St., New Haven. (\$289-\$93.40, shubert.com).