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Ailey II Ascending

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By: Stephen Robb

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World class dance company brings elite young dancers and three premieres to the Arsht Center



Ailey II's Darion Turner in Rena Butler's "In Session."

STEPHEN ROBB
Miami Times Staff Writer

When the Ailey II dance company returns to the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts on Jan. 9, you might want to catch former West Palm Beach resident Jordyn White before she hits the big time.

She initially attended Bak Middle School of the Arts and then transitioned to Alexander W. Dreyfoos School of the Arts, both in West Palm Beach. White has fond memories of her high school experience.

"I spent my four years training pretty much every day in ballet, modern and jazz and all other types of codified techniques," White said. "But luckily for me, a lot of people from the (Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater) would come to my high school and either teach a class or choreograph a new piece. And so I was really, really well aware of Ailey already in my high school time."

She said in her junior year, she learned about a six-week summer intensive program at the Ailey School.

"I had auditioned, and I went summer of 2019 and I absolutely fell in love, and I was like, I do not want to come back home. I want to stay here. I want to keep training. I want to keep learning," White said.

After graduating high school, she auditioned and was accepted by the Ailey School for its three-year certificate program. Right before finishing her

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Ailey II dancers in Rena Butler's "In Session."



Ailey II dancers in Rena Butler's "In Session."

AILEY II

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third year, she auditioned for Ailey II, where she was contracted as an apprentice. She later graduated from University of Florida online and became a full-time company member for Ailey II.

She's now in her final year in that position.

Her next stop?

"Anywhere that will take me," White said. "I'm auditioning, obviously, for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, first company position, hopefully. But I also want to audition for Alonzo King Lines, maybe somewhere in Europe, somewhere in London."

For now, she's looking forward to performing at the Arsht.

"It'll be really good to perform there again. It's a very beautiful spot."



Choreographer Rena Butler.

CREAM OF THE CROP

Ailey II Artistic Director Francesca Harper offers another reason to check out the performance: watching 12 dancers who beat out 1,000 others in the audition process.

"These are really the best of the best," Harper said. From Ailey II, "they go on to do incredible things like join the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and other companies, international companies in Europe or in Australia. They go on to join some of the most wonderful, prestigious local companies: Philadanco, Dayton Contemporary Dance Theater, Broadway productions. They go on to just do incredible things afterwards, because they're really the cream of the crop."

The Alvin Ailey Dance Company founded Ailey II in 1974 to give its student dancers the chance to become professionals.

"One of (Alvin Ailey's) goals was to give students from the school an opportunity to work with choreographers and to have that experience," Harper said. "The artistic director who preceded me, Sylvia Waters, talked about Ailey II kind of being

a finishing school in its own right, so they really get to polish a lot of their artistic skills and the approach to the work and develop and hone new creative skills that then lead them into their next job."

THREE PREMIERES

The show at the Arsht will include three Miami premieres commissioned by Ailey II: "Berry Dreamin'"; "Third Person POV"; and "In Session," Harper describes the audience reaction to the pieces as "over the moon."

"The main feedback that I've gotten is that (the works are) really diverse. They're very different," Harper said. "So the audience can really expect to travel (from) the most intimate and quiet of moments to these wild, very boisterous, audacious, full-company moments. The audiences have really enjoyed having these unexpected offerings and experiences from beginning to the end of one evening."

"Berry Dreamin'" features the music of Chuck Berry. Harper said choreographer Chavar Monteiro incorporated Berry's teen years and his friends into the work.

"These young people are in

development ... and they're going through all of the trials and tribulations of what it means to become an adult."

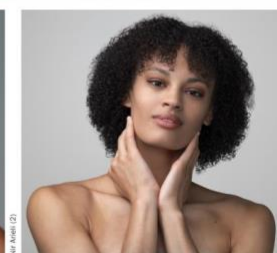
"In Session" is another coming-of-age story.

"We have two kinds of coming-of-age works in our rep this year," Harper said. "I think in (choreographer Rena Butler's) piece, she really navigates the process of the characters finding themselves while moving within and rebelling against the collective needs of community."

"The dancers shared a lot of their personal insights, and



Ailey II artistic director Francesca Harper.



Ailey II's Jordyn White.

I think she also gives them credit in saying she developed it in collaboration with the dancers," Harper said.

Harper said "Third Person Point of View," choreographed by Mykal Stromile, focuses on relationships.

"It really has this intimacy that I feel has been really great for the young dancers to analyze and really delve into intimate relationships," Harper said. "I think the piece really ultimately invites the audience to witness from the outside and observe a relationship as it unfolds without ever really being directly addressed."

FROM WAGNER

TO DOECHII

For Butler, "In Session" was probably a walk in the park after providing the choreography for "Parsifal," a five-hour Wagner opera for the San Francisco Opera. In contrast, "In Session" is

listed at 24 minutes.

"Yes, it was a mountain to climb," Butler said.

In a thematic 360-degree turn, Butler said she found inspiration for "In Session" in the music and words of rapper Doechii and Nickelodeon's "Hey Arnold."

Butler vividly recalls the call from Harper to commission the new work.

"Francesca Harper is a legend ... I've always regarded her as a legend. So when she calls me, of course, I go weak to my knees first," Butler said. "I told her I had interest in Doechii, and I made a solo for one of her company members for her to graduate from Ailey Fordham, and it was to Doechii, and she told me, 'Why don't we just blow that up into a full company piece?' And the woman has vision, so I really trust her, and I saw it as a challenge."

"I think she's wildly imaginative," Butler said about

Doechi, herself a Florida native. An Apple Music interview with her got the wheels turning. "She is mysterious to me in ways, overly confident. I was just really inspired by the way she spoke, the cadence in her voice, also the confidence and the vulnerability all at the same time. And of course, I identify because she's also a young Black woman."

Doechi's interview was played over the dancing.

Butler said the piece was assembled with its dancers in mind.

"I wanted to do something with Ailey II that pertains particularly to that grouping of people," Butler said. "They're all young ingenues in the world of dance just getting their career started. So what can I make for them that feels like it's attainable in terms of content, but then also challenging and fun, that's going to push them but also meet them where they're at?"

"What are the things it takes to feel confident in a world that is constantly going to throw you left, right, up, down of center?" Butler asked.

Meanwhile, the piece's classroom setting led to thoughts of "Hey Arnold."

"I really loved 'Hey Arnold' on Nickelodeon, and so my lighting designer Asia Jackson was super imaginative where she was asking, 'Why don't we take the windows of the illustrations of the cartoon and make something that feels like we are imprisoned in a classroom?' And then how does each individual answer the question of conformity versus individuality while navigating self assurance?"

"It's high octave, it's energetic, but it does have moments of pause. It does have moments of reflection," Butler said.



Ailey II dancer Jordyn White.



Ailey II dancers in Rena Butler's "In Session."

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Ailey II: The Next Generation of Dance

WHEN: Friday, Jan. 9, 8 p.m.

WHERE: Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts / Knight Concert Hall 1300 Biscayne Blvd., Miami, FL

TICKETS: \$40.95 - \$93.60