

Hollywood Soapbox

[INTERVIEW: Renée I. McDonald explores social media with latest Ailey II piece](#)

By: John Soltes
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Renée I. McDonald pulls double duty in life. She's an acclaimed choreographer, whose latest work, *Likes.vs.Life*, is currently being presented at The Joyce Theater in Midtown Manhattan, courtesy of Ailey II, the second company of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. She's also an attorney practicing in Jamaica. Both of these professions would seem to require a thorough and constant presence on social media, but McDonald is a once-in-a-while type of user of social media. And, in fact, the detrimental impacts of social media is the thesis of her new work.

"I don't have a very good relationship with social media," McDonald said in a recent phone interview with a laugh. "I've personally felt the effects of consuming and participating in social media, and the idea for the piece really came from my personal experience ... from my own experience dealing with comparison and the anxiety around posting and what are people going to think. Do I need external validation? How do I feel about likes, and does my content truly reflect my actual life — the whole idea of comparing your behind-the-scenes with someone else's highlight reel. So I had the idea to create a piece that explores that in quite an abstract way. The piece has literal moments, but it's largely abstract movement that kind of expresses my various emotions regarding social media."

The choreographer said she used to feel pressure to interact more with social media. Her two professions often call for self-promotion, especially when one of her dance works was premiering in Jamaica or around the world. Today, she doesn't feel that pressure; instead, she's content simply sharing a post on occasion and reposting the announcements of others.

"I just accept the fact that the marketing side of my career is going to be lacking, and so for me I just rely more on word of mouth," she said. "If you've come to a show and you've seen my work, you're interested in having me do a work for you, you just call me. I'm not interested in becoming a famous choreographer or anything like that. The self-promotion is something that I have not done too much of the last few years."

Likes.vs.Life has a couple scenes that directly address McDonald's views on social media. Audience members will have the chance to witness these scenes through Sunday, March 22; that's when the Ailey II residency closes.

"So there is one scene in the work where ... there's a relationship happening, and that scene really addresses the sometimes pretentious, kind of fake relationships that sometimes we put on social media, when really as a relationship, they're going through difficulties," the choreographer said. "We have another scene where someone is really hating on someone behind-the-scenes, even though they're pretending to like them in person, and that's one of the things that we find on social media. People feel empowered when they are anonymous or they're not visible or they're not right in front of your face, but then once they're right in front of your face, they don't have that power and energy to really address you in the way that they honestly feel. So that is addressed. Also the loneliness and the isolation that can come with having followers, but not really having any friends."

Likes.vs.Life, which runs 11 minutes, is a work meant for three dancers, which is unusual for McDonald but also a welcome challenge. She normally creates dances that are larger in scale, for as many as 25 performers.

"That's generally my preference, but my last work with Ailey II, which is entitled *Breaking.Point*, was a full-company work," she said. "It had 12 dancers. Now that I was back for a second work, they were more inclined for me to try to do something small cast. ... I have very few trios in my rep, but I was excited to challenge myself to create effective movement and a moving piece with smaller numbers."

McDonald, who is currently the associate artistic director of Company Dance Theatre Jamaica, counts herself as a fan of Ailey II. Even though *Likes vs Life* only calls for three dancers, she was able to work with the entire company because there are multiple casts, understudies and alternates. Most of them needed to learn the work.

"And it was absolutely amazing because they were well-trained," McDonald said. "They're so technically proficient. They are so professional, polite. It was an amazing, positive energy in the space, and I'm just really grateful for that because that kind of energy is something that really affects me. ... It's just a complete treasure to work with them."