

The great ether debate • Gift Guide: Opposites attract

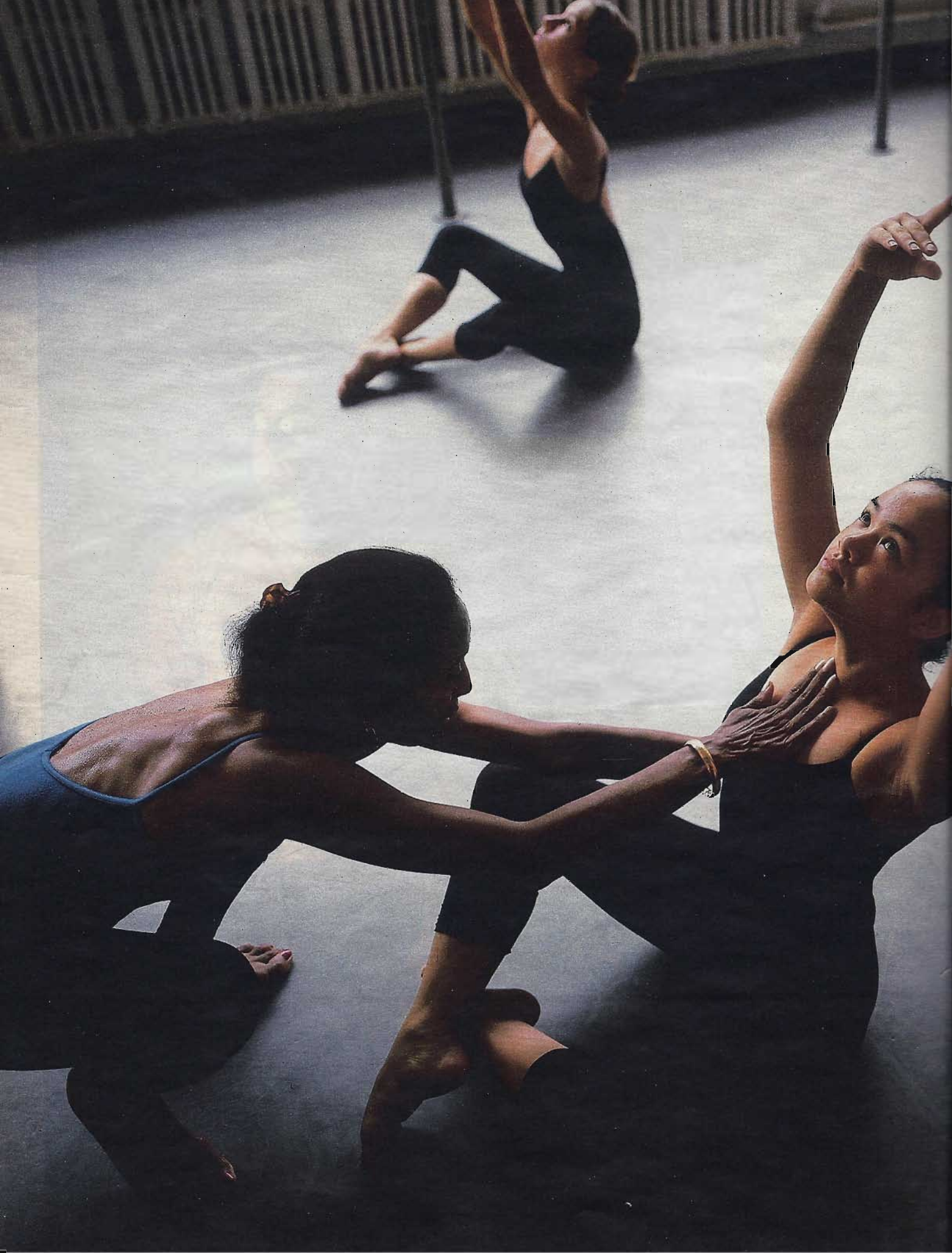
The Boston Globe Magazine

November 26, 2000

Two steps forward

Denise Jefferson was told ballet was off-limits for black girls, but that didn't stop her from dancing. *By Alexandra Marshall*







All the right moves

By
*Alexandra
Marshall*

The school corridor is a maze of arms and legs as the dancers prepare themselves for the first class of the morning. “Please be mindful to leave enough space for Faculty and Staff to walk through when stretching,” reads one sign at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center on West 61st Street behind New York’s Lincoln Center. Though these are mostly college-age students, their hair is impressively natural – kept either long enough or short enough so as not to distract – and their street clothes and jewelry, the jeans and earrings appropriate to their age group, are stashed in their backpacks. Some are dressed in layers,

Denise Jefferson liked ballet, but a professional career wasn’t in the cards. Then she discovered contemporary dance.

Continued on Page 36

Alexandra Marshall is a writer living in Boston. Her fifth novel, The Court of Common Pleas, will be published in the spring by Houghton Mifflin.

Denise Jefferson, director of the Ailey School in New York, helping a student “find that energy flow.”

All the right moves

Continued from Page 17

their black barefoot tights for the Graham-based technique class worn over rolled-up classical pale pink tights required for the ballet class to follow immediately. And when the door to the studio is opened, like swimmers entering the sea, they slide across the linoleum floor and take their places. The accompanist sits attentively behind his three cylindrical drums in the front corner of the room, and I arrange myself on the floor next to him. I straighten my back and try to suspend my own body on a breath as deep as I can produce. This posture seems to be the best I can achieve. As a former dancer myself, this wasn't always the case.

A basic principle of the dance technique devised by Martha Graham is the contraction and release of the spine. Beginning seated on

the floor, the 27 dancers in this class are guided through a series of interconnected exercises, reaching beyond themselves as if their limbs, extending and retracting, are elongating with each breath. The drummer-accompanist is so in synch with the teacher that she only needs to lift her chin to cue him, and as his hands move across the surface of his drums, there is only the steady pulsing rhythm to suggest exertion.

Teaching this class is the director of the Ailey School, Denise Jefferson, whose own muscular body – like those of students less than half her age – has neither the stringy nor the bulky muscles of the recklessly overexercised. Dressed in ivory leotard and tights, she arches her upper body to demonstrate a stretch, with the liquid grace of a fountain. Her voice is gentle as she coaxes the dancers through their exercises while walking

among them, only having to place a hand here, a hand there, to align them perfectly. The dancers' faces betray no strain, either, and yet during the class, the enormous windows that look out over the neighboring housing project gradually become opaque with the steam from their effort. For these 90 fluid minutes in a studio with no clock, I watch these accomplished dancers move through their incrementally more complex patterns of movement with only a few words of advice from "Ms. J."

"Keep stretching the chin up to the ceiling," she says, and "Never feel like the head is resting on the back of the neck." Or "I want your face to disappear. I want to see your nose, maybe your chin." And then, "See if you can find that energy flow." As the dancers progress across the floor in pairs, in increasingly more rigorous combinations, she encourages:

"Don't be afraid of it. Do it as if this were your audition step. To show how fabulous you are. What power you have."

DENISE JEFFERSON joined the Ailey School faculty in 1974 and has been its director since 1984. But in 1961, when we met as freshmen at Wheaton College in Norton, she was new to – and suspicious of – the range of varied techniques known collectively as "modern" dance. We relax after class in the school's cozy library, where awards fill the wall space over the shelves of books and dance magazines, where there are videotapes and a VCR, and where, on the large reading table, a sewing machine can be hastily set up for last-minute costume adjustments. Over coffee and a muffin that she barely breaks into, Denise describes her roundabout path to the position she now holds.

Growing up in what Denise calls a "charmed childhood" in upper-middle-class Chicago, the first of two daughters of parents who gave them an early introduction to the arts, Denise had begun her ballet training with a dynamic teacher named Edna L. McRae. But then this initial experience of herself as a promising dancer became, at a crucial point in her development, the opposite kind of formative experience, of an opportunity denied her. "Well, I didn't plan to dance professionally," she tells me. "I had gotten . . ." she says, and hesitates. "I –" and then she begins again. "Well, what really happened was that when I was about 12, my ballet teacher took my mother and me out to lunch to talk about my career. And she said that I had enough talent to be a ballet dancer, but it was going to be very difficult, because there were virtually no

blacks in white companies. There was a small black ballet company, but I'd never seen them. I'd only seen the New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theatre, and so the *thought*, at 12, of fighting my way into a hostile environment was *terrifying*."

Denise's experience of the restricted world of ballet paralleled that of the legendary dancer Judith Jamison, who succeeded Alvin Ailey 11 years ago as artistic director of the dance theater Ailey founded. Two seasons ago, the company performed "Echo: Far From Home," an autobiographical ballet choreographed by Jamison. It begins as the curtain opens onto an empty, darkened stage, with a disembodied amplified voice booming into the void: "No black girl can do ballet."

But whereas Judith Jamison persisted in her ballet training and was famously "discovered" in a 1964

master class with Agnes De Mille, debuting in New York with American Ballet Theatre, Denise's ballet teacher's warning instead caused her to reassess. Recalling it today, she says that she decided she "didn't love ballet. I liked moving, but I didn't really enjoy pointe, so I began to take fewer classes, and I became a teenager, et cetera. So then when I went to Wheaton, I was not thinking about dance at all. I thought, I love foreign languages, I want to travel, I want to see the world, maybe I'll join the UN. My head was there."

As she explains it, it was essentially to fulfill the college gym requirement that she returned to dancing. "I hated gym, and I didn't want to do basketball, so I thought: Oh, God. Well, dancing's OK. I've done it for a long time. I can do it. I'll do that." But Denise remembers her audition for the Wheaton

dance group as "horrible," since she was asked to improvise, and in ballet, she'd always been told exactly what to do. And now she was supposed to sit on the floor in a dance class "for the first time ever! It just didn't make much sense to me."

Then one day in dance class we were shown the classic film *A Dancer's World*, and Denise learned that the Martha Graham Company was racially integrated. More specifically, she saw, and identified with, the lead dancer, Mary Hinkson. "I said, 'Wait a minute. This is real technique. There's something really quite beautiful in here.' And I thought, 'If I'm going to do this at all, I want to be like her.'"

A second pivotal experience occurred the following year in a master dance class taught at the New England Conservatory by Donald McKayle. By the mid-'50s, he had estab-

lished himself in New York as the leading black choreographer, "carving a niche for himself with dances on social themes, performed by racially mixed casts," as the *New York Times* dance critic Jennifer Denning writes in her biography of Ailey. The way Denise remembers it, I had gone into Boston for a master class at the conservatory taught by McKayle and had told Denise she should come with me next time. In her precise memory of that class, she describes the "thrill of walking into that huge room, and there was this tall, beautiful African-American man teaching the class!" And whereas in ballet, as she says, "you're always fighting your body because you're not turned out enough – or you're not this, you're not that – and you can't do enough turns, in that class I could do everything. Or I felt I could. It just worked."

Following McKayle, she went to the intensive summer dance program held at Connecticut College in New London, where she also took classes from Donald Wood (he was teaching for Martha Graham) and Jose Limon. "And that did it. There were performances every night, and I was taking five technique classes a day. And was hungry for it."

AFTER THAT SUMMER of 1963, she'd felt she was ready to move to New York and dance, but her mother told her, "No, you finish Wheaton, and then you can do whatever you want." So in the meantime she took more master classes in Boston while educating herself by attending dance concerts by Donald McKayle's company and other choreographers, like Merce Cunningham (her lead dancer, Carolyn Brown, had gone to Wheaton, too). After graduation, Denise did move to New York, where she spent

about a month "just kind of shopping around." McKayle's company wasn't in the city at the time, so she took herself over to the Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance, where she found the door to the main studio slightly ajar. The company was rehearsing, and there was Mary Hinkson, and so Denise told herself, "I am in *the place*. This is it."

She was awarded a scholarship to study at the Graham school, and because all the students were given free tickets to the company's concert season, Denise saw her favorite teacher, Helen McGehee, perform in "Cave of the Heart," a dance about the legend of Medea. This was an experience that Denise

For Jefferson, one value of a formal structure is that the specific movement "becomes embedded in the dancer's bones."

says "wedded" her to the Graham technique, because what she saw was "technical perfection," an important component for her because of all her ballet training.

"And yet," she continues, "there was also this dark passion. I mean, Helen was killing people onstage, being absolutely ferocious in showing that side of the human spirit, and doing it with an artistic instrument that was so beautifully trained. And I thought, that's it. I want to be able to express all these feelings – the dark ones can come out there as well as the sunny ones – and to have a technique that is beautiful and perfect enough to be able to do it. Because I could never, after all those years of ballet – and I liked the formality of it, I liked the discipline of

it, I liked being clear about what my goals were for my body – go into some kind of 'flip-flop' dance. For me, that just wasn't going to work."

The contrast she is making is with "release technique," a dance form that Denise says "can work very well once a dancer already has a strong technique but which doesn't train sufficiently for beginning dancers." She feels that the additional value of a formal structure – ballet as well as the codified modern techniques of Graham or Cunningham or Lester Horton, who was Ailey's own mentor – is that the specific movement "becomes embedded in the dancer's bones."

During her second year in New York, when Denise was taking advanced-level classes at the Martha Graham Center, a former Graham Company member, Pearl Lang, was one of the school's guest teachers. Lang liked Denise's dancing and asked her to join the company Lang had founded to showcase her own choreography.

This was the beginning of Denise's professional career, but it was interrupted that same year, 1967, when she married John Roy Harper II – she still refers to him as a "lovely person" – and followed him back to his home state of South Carolina, where he would attend law school in order to fulfill what Denise calls "his destiny" as a civil rights lawyer in the South.

In 1969, their daughter, Francesca, was born, but after three years in Columbia, South Carolina, Denise took Francesca to her own hometown of Chicago for a year. Then, in 1971, she and Francesca moved to New York, where she had found a "greater variety of experiences and better education." Once there, Denise returned to the former settlement house on East 59th Street that still housed

Lang's group and reestablished herself as a dancer.

In the meantime, Alvin Ailey had received a \$37,000 grant from the Rockefeller Fund that enabled him to move his relatively new dance company into a renovated studio and performance space upstairs from Lang. Denise doesn't recall her very first experience of the man whose vision of dance would soon come to define the rest of her own career. But she vividly remembers the honor of being invited by him to perform, although knee surgery ultimately prevented her from dancing.

After her recovery, Denise contacted Pearl Lang and "picked it up again," but it was here that she began to shift away from performance into teaching. By 1974, her daughter was 5, and because it had become more difficult to tour, Denise accepted a position on the faculty of the Ailey School,

where she has remained ever since.

In effect, then, whether it has been despite or because of her own lost years before rediscovering herself as a dancer, Denise has made a career out of providing opportunities for others. And for today's aspiring dancers who have both the exceptional talent and the necessary will, the wide-open premise of the Ailey School – that dance should be available to everyone – is a reversal of the "hostile environment" of ballet confronting the adolescent Denise. Today's young dancers are instructed and inspired by the Ailey vision. Always in collaboration with Judith Jamison, it is Denise's purpose to ensure open access to each new generation.

AND AT HOME, TOO, in fact, Denise has raised a professional dancer. Her daughter, Francesca Harper, now 31, began her

own ballet studies early, and at age 7 she attended the Joffrey Ballet School in Greenwich Village. At 10, she moved to what Denise terms the "more intensive experience" of the School of American Ballet, which included performing in the New York City Ballet's *Nutcracker* on the stage of Lincoln Center's New York State Theater.

"Because ballet was Francesca's dream," Denise says her support took the form of "You *can* do this." Also, since the world of professional ballet is now more inclusive, Francesca's career in dance has already included eight years in Germany with the Frankfurt Ballet. Recently, too, Francesca has been one of six dancers working with a choreographer as a sort of "physical laboratory" for the Glenn Close television version of *South Pacific*. And this past summer, as part of the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue at

Harvard University stimulated by the work of the playwright and actress Anna Deavere Smith, Francesca Harper performed a work-in-progress created in an improvisational collaboration with her aunt, Margo Jefferson, the Pulitzer Prize-winning culture critic for *The New York Times*. The *Boston Globe's* reviewer experienced the piece as "provocative" and detailed its powerful impact upon the audience.

In that same audience, Denise says, she was made "tremendously excited and proud" by their combining dance, slides, and text to form a three-generation family narrative told in the voices of four women. Along with Margo's and Francesca's stories of their lives, the story of Denise growing up in dance is conveyed in pictures, and Denise and Margo's mother is also represented, as the fourth voice and the third generation, by means of let-

ters she had written when she was about Francesca's age. Behind this joint exploration of the impact of gender and race is their concrete and shared devotion, to one another and to the arts. According to Denise, as she describes her childhood, this was always the case.

Her Chicago-raised mother was an English major who was a social worker before settling into her life as wife and mother. Denise and Margo went to the highly regarded University of Chicago Lab School and both took extra music and dance lessons from about age 6. As a family, they regularly attended plays at the Goodman Theater and concerts by the Chicago Ballet and the Chicago Symphony. "Dad was a very good jazz trombonist," Denise says, "but he set aside whatever professional ambitions he may have had in music in order to attend medical school. From his

home in Mississippi he went to Denver and then Los Angeles, where he was denied entry to UCLA, so instead attended a black medical school in order to become a pediatrician."

Along with other members of Chicago's affluent black community, Dr. and Mrs. Jefferson enjoyed a cabin cruiser on Lake Michigan and provided their two daughters with frequent opportunities for travel. But as Denise puts it, when it came time to choose a college for her — and because in Chicago an Eastern women's college had cachet — the family made the selection (as casually as many families did then) on the basis of a conversation at the A & P that her mother had with a friend whose daughter was enrolled at Wheaton College.

It was Mrs. Jefferson's simple misunderstanding that day that at Wheaton there were five blacks in each class — not five in the whole college — and so Denise came, unprepared, from being one of 15 black students in her high school class of 127 to the "shock" of being the lone African-American in the Wheaton class of '65.

Imagine her experience now, though, when at this year's commencement, where Denise was awarded an honorary doctorate of fine arts, the newly invested chairwoman of the board is Patricia King ('63), who back then had been one of those very few others. The ceremony's invocation was delivered by a young African-American woman, president of the Student Government Association. And among her now coed classmates there were a comfortable number of graduating seniors wearing festive kente-cloth stoles over their black academic gowns.

In Denise's remarks to this audience that also included her mother, her sis-

ter, and her daughter — as well as many of her proud classmates at our 35th reunion — she credited her college experience as having been "a process of learning to compete with that person we wanted to become, rather than, more narrowly, with each other." It prepared her, she said, "to trust my instincts, my brain. To prepare myself."

ALVIN AILEY HAD also been headed to college, to study Romance languages, when, in 1947 in Los Angeles, he was introduced to the dance pioneer Lester Horton, a film choreographer whose Dance Theater was the first exclusively modern dance theater (and the first multiracial troupe) in the country. Ai-

Denise Jefferson has made a career out of providing opportunities for others.

ley watched Horton teach for six months before taking his first class and becoming irresistibly drawn into the "freewheeling, encompassing artistic atmosphere that existed only in [Horton's] studio and theater," says Ailey's biographer. To this day, the Horton technique is taught at the Ailey School as the modern-dance counterpoint to the Graham-based technique. Ailey created an eclectic dance environment in which art and social concerns are joined, just as Lester Horton did in West Hollywood. But it was toward his own African-American traditions that Ailey had turned — the way Martha Graham looked to ancient Greek mythology for her themes — for what have become his most enduring dances. As Ailey once wrote in a program note about the cultural heritage of the American Negro, "I and my

dance theater celebrate this trembling beauty."

And to witness the power of the beauty of it, you only had to be in the audience for the Ailey School 2000 Spring Performance. The program was designed to showcase the students, although — according to Judith Jamison's wishes — "not to make it like a recital," where there is a long sequence of pieces without any unifying thread. To this end, there were six bold new dances created by this year's Ailey School guest choreographers, each performed with vigor and precision by the most advanced-level students. In addition, this new work was bracketed by excerpts of Ailey's two most famous pieces ("Cry" and "Revelations"), which have always been performed exclusively by members of the first and second companies. For this night, however, these professional dancers — all of whom had come up from the Ailey School — were joined onstage by students from the junior division.

In a segment from the solo "Cry" at the beginning of this program, nine young girls performed steps from the signature piece Ailey choreographed in 1965 for Judith Jamison, and they were performing alongside a principal dancer from the company. Then, in the "Rocka My Soul" selection from Ailey's most popular dance, his 1960 "Revelations," the women dancers were joined by a girl from the junior division. With choreography adapted by Hope Clark, Ailey's last performing partner, the young dancer India Smith embodied onstage what Denise calls the "talent, coordination, musicality, and confidence, the steadiness of spirit" necessary to dance performance.

The next night's program is the annual gala, which finishes with a reception back at the Ailey

School, where the students have transformed the studios into spring gardens decorated with deep buckets of peonies and lilies and huge sprays of dogwood and apple blossoms. In that audience are the benefactors who sustain the work of the school and the company, and onstage Judith Jamison presides, in all her trademark elegance, as artistic director of the company she joined 35 years ago.

That year was 1965, when Ailey dedicated "Cry" for "all black women everywhere – especially our mothers." And it was the same year that, on the insistence of her own mother, Denise Jefferson graduated from college first, before beginning to find her own way into the professional dance world of which Ailey would come to be at the center.

On this next to last night of the Ailey School year, it is Denise who welcomes the audience, along

with Sylvia Waters, the former Ailey principal dancer who has been the artistic director of Ailey II for the entire 25 years the second company has existed. Denise praises the accomplishments of the emerging dancers, who have been selected by audition and whose friends and families have come from everywhere to celebrate them. And thus it is made clear that, while the durable continuity of the Ailey legacy resides in the deliberate joining of the past with the present, the Ailey ideal has also always looked to the future.

"When he got older, he turned to the little ones" was how Denise described Alvin Ailey to me the morning after the performance. "He'd buy their raffle tickets and enjoy coming to the studio and having them all around him, but he always had two sides. So while he'd love having the little girl dance, he'd still have said, 'A little girl? In

my dance?' And then he'd have said, 'Well, OK, go try it. I'll decide.'"

Since Ailey's death 11 years ago, his successors have had to decide, but they are all rigorous guardians of his legacy. Dances from the Ailey repertory are performed only with permission, and only lately have the most advanced students been taught portions of the dances, specifically those students in the new bachelor of fine arts program offered jointly by the Ailey School and Fordham University. Enrollment in the Ailey School has expanded from 125 students in 1969 to its current 3,500. For 16 years the entire range of study has been directed by Denise Jefferson, whom Ailey himself chose to carry forward his mission to make dance instruction available to everyone. Today's Ailey School runs 160 classes a week, beginning with a junior division that offers seven levels of train-

ing for children as young as 3 and a professional division with four opportunities for concentrated study.

In a nice symmetry, a student from Wheaton College who last spring successfully auditioned for the summer intensive program completed the session and, according to Denise, performed well in the West African dance on the final program. Nicole Rodriguez is now in her senior year at Wheaton, and as she determines her future, whether in dance or not, I am struck that Denise's choice of words to describe her – "focused, energetic, clear, a lovely mover" – is exactly the way I remember Denise herself all that time ago, at that same point in her own life.

The continuity is not only pleasing but gratifying. In the world-famous dance company known as the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, more than 75 percent of the current danc-

ers have come from the school, as have all the dancers of Ailey II. This deeper continuity is as deliberate as it is effective, which is why it is evident that though Alvin Ailey died the very week of his dance center's move uptown from Times Square to just behind Lincoln Center, his ideal is not only alive but thriving.

Ailey articulated his vision the year before his death in a *New York Times* tribute by the dance critic Anna Kisselgoff, on the occasion of Ailey's being awarded the nation's highest arts honor at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.: "I am trying to show the world we are all human beings, that color is not important, that what is important is the quality of our work, of a culture in which the young are not afraid to take chances and can hold onto their values and self-esteem, especially in the arts and in dance. That's what it's all about to me." □