

Alvin Ailey American
Dance Theater in Camille
A. Brown's *The Groove*
to *Nobody's Business*



Finding the Power

Building community,
IABD gives African American
artists an enduring platform.

BY CHARMAINE PATRICIA WARREN

the history goes like this. African Americans in dance have had to gather on their own to celebrate the black tradition in American dance. Modern dance pioneers Edna Guy and Hemsley Winfield held the “First Negro Dance Recital in America” in 1931, and Guy and Alison Burroughs organized a second one, called “Negro Dance Evening,” in 1937. Much later, Alvin Ailey started his company of primarily black dancers in 1958, and Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook formed Dance Theatre of Harlem for black ballet dancers in 1969. Brooklyn Academy of Music hosted a momentous three-day festival of blacks in dance in 1983.

And in 1988, the International Association of Blacks in Dance assembled to follow in this tradition. Twenty-two years later, IABD is now a force that continues to make this happen. The IABD annual conference has become a forum where African Americans can ask questions and not only get answers but help—particularly in terms of getting visibility. This kind of nurturing is what IABD has always been about.

Top: Eduardo Parino, Courtesy AAADT

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Rachel Foster of PNB photographed by Matthew Karas

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But even more than that, for young African American artists who perform at an IABD conference, it is almost sure that they will make a connection that will help launch their career. This is not by chance: It is part of the mission of the conference to continue the artistic lineage. And it is part of the spirit of the community that older artists give a hand to younger ones.

Two examples are Camille A. Brown and Rennie Harris. Both were “seen” at an IABD conference, got work, and their careers took off. Brown showed a piece at IABD in 2006 and caught the eye of Ailey director Judith Jamison, who quickly commissioned her. The result was *The Groove to Nobody’s Business* (2007), which put a different look on Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Clearly influenced by urban cool, Brown re-created a ride on the New York City subway with familiar characters, whose daily grind comes through in movement. The tempo is quick and the energy is highly theatrical. Brown’s terse yet fluid movement digs deep into the ground but soars with equal lilt as the cast plays musical chairs, vying for a seat. Brown was instantly recognized as a new voice on the scene (see “Quick Q & A,” Dec. 2007).

Today Brown speaks of how IABD embraced her. “The founders of IABD encourage you to believe that you can do this,” she says. “The love that we received was immeasurable. IABD gives you the space to grow.”

Harris’ story is similar. Baba Chuck Davis, founder of DanceAfrica, met Harris at an IABD conference and invited his then three-year-old company, Rennie Harris Puremovement, to present *Students of the Asphalt Jungle* for DanceAfrica 1995 at Brooklyn Academy of Music. This was not traditional African dance. Here there were bulked up, bare-chested, sneaker-wearing men of RHPM



Raphael Xavier (kneeling), and Shafeek “Mouse” Westbrook, aloft, in Rennie Harris’ P-Funk (1992).

in loose-fitting white pants who ravaged the stage with their brand of hip-hop-meets-traditional-African-dance. They jumped like the Maasai, and they balanced on their heads and spun; they isolated their movement like East Africans, or they snaked through popping and locking. The BAM crowd went wild.

Harris reflected on being introduced to the concert dance arena through IABD. “This was a major paradigm shift for my company,” he says. “We were proud to be black, but we were like most hip hop heads at the time: We only claimed ourselves; we didn’t acknowledge our African lineage. I became determined to research and educate the masses about our heritage through hip hop. IABD provides an opportunity to continue the legacy of black expression within American culture.”

These exciting beginnings for Brown and Harris brought them a great deal of visibility. Others have followed similar paths; for instance, Christopher Huggins, whose dynamic *Enemy Behind the Gates* was seen at a 2001 IABD conference.



Ailey II in Christopher Huggins’ *When Dawn Comes...*

Top: Christopher Duggan, Courtesy RHPM, Bottom: Eduardo Patino, Courtesy Ailey II

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The Giordano company
in *Pyrokinesis* by
Christopher Huggins

Huggins has subsequently created pieces for many companies, including Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago and Louisiana Dance Theatre, as well as IABD regulars Lula Washington Dance Theatre, Dallas Black Dance Theatre, Cleo Parker Robinson Dance, and Ailey II.

Choreographers must be IABD members for at least two years before they are considered for a festival, and often spend much of that time preparing by creating, rehearsing and testing their works. Then they send in a reel of their work, and if chosen (by committee), they participate in the festival by performing, teaching, and/or speaking on a panel. Once there, this is the place to network, share, and be empowered by African American dance icons that they may have only read about. Previously celebrated legends include Katherine Dunham, Carmen de Lavallade, Donald McKayle, and Eleo Pomare. Camille Brown, who was a student at University of North Carolina School of the Arts when she first attended, says she was afforded the rare opportunity “to be in the presence of legends.”

At the helm, from day one, was founder and artistic director of Philadanco Joan Myers Brown. Back in 1988 she was awarded \$5,000 from the Pew Charitable Trusts to make her dream a reality. Myers Brown made good on her dream when approximately 80 black dance professionals—including Lula Washington, Louis Johnson, Denise Jefferson (director of The Ailey School), the late Jeraldyn Blunden (Dayton Contemporary Dance Company), Cleo Parker Robinson, and Ann Williams (Dallas Black Dance Theatre)—attended this first IABD conference.

Each year attendees take master classes, go to provocative political and educational panels, and participate in intergenerational dialogues—plus they get to network and party. Panel discussions cover a range of topics, including the history of African American dance, dance in histori-

cally black colleges, the business of dance, issues of artistry, and teaching methods.

The theme of this year’s conference, co-sponsored by Philadanco and the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, is “Back to Basics: Strengthening our Institutions for a New Generation.” From January 13 to 17, Rennie Harris, Zane Booker, Gaynell Sherrod, Kim Bears-Bailey, Karen Brown, and Germaine Goodson will lead classes. Attendees can expect the midnight African dance class with Baba Chuck Davis, plus a late-night hip hop class. The rich array of panel topics includes the goals of presenters in the electronic age, how women of the diaspora are contributing to the arts, career transitions, and alternative medical care for men.

An evening titled “Meet the Philadelphians” will present Rennie Harris Puremovement, Kulu Mele African American Dance & Drum Ensemble, Zane Booker, Eleone Dance Theatre, and Danco 2. A different program includes Urban Bush Women, Philadanco, Dallas Black Dance, Lula Washington Dance Company from Los Angeles, Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble from Denver, and Camille A. Brown.

From 80 participants in 1988, to upwards of 600 participants today who converge from across the country—and from Europe, South America, Africa, Australia, and the Caribbean—the conference continues to grow. Over the years, the conferences have been held in Los Angeles, Denver, Washington, DC, Philadelphia, Dallas, Dayton, New York, and Toronto.

As Myers Brown looks towards the future, she affirms, “I’m still amazed that the conference continues. Outsiders don’t see or feel the need, but we know there is a need.”

Charmaine Patricia Warren is on faculty at the Ailey/Fordham BFA program and NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts.