



Deliberate Joy: Francesca Harper on Legacy, Memory, and Ailey II

Description

As the Artistic Director of Ailey II, Francesca Harper stands at the intersection of lineage, innovation, and care. The daughter of longtime Ailey School director Denise Jefferson, Harper grew up inside the institution that shaped generations of dancers. She later became a principal dancer with William Forsythe's Ballett Frankfurt, building an international reputation for experimental rigor, theatricality, and interdisciplinary vision. Her career has spanned Broadway, choreography, film, opera, and collaborations with leading visual and sonic artists.

Ailey II is widely known as the "next generation" of Alvin Ailey dancers, channels technical excellence, emotional transparency, and fearless contemporary performance. Under Harper's leadership, the company bridges Black expressive traditions, Forsythean experimentation, theatrical storytelling, and somatic awareness.

Our conversation unfolding over Zoom as she prepared to leave New York on tour felt less like a formal interview and more like a generous, nourishing check-in about memory, joy, and what it means to lead with care. Before we formally began, I found myself telling Harper how deeply I admire her: the breadth of her work, the fluidity with which she moves across genres, and the clarity of her artistic purpose. But what struck me most was what I told her directly: it was the way she leads with humanity.

Portrait of a smiling woman with natural curly hair wearing a colorful beaded necklace against a gray background.
Photo: Ailey II Artistic Director Francesca Harper. Photo by Nir Arieli

A Lineage Made of People, Not Just Repertoire

When Harper talks about Ailey II, she doesn't begin with repertory or touring schedules. She begins with people—the ones who held her up, the ones she learned from, the ones she now feels responsible to. She grew up inside the world she leads, absorbing the subtle ways lineage becomes a lived inheritance: the sound of rehearsals, the tone of a teacher's voice, the way elders move through a room.

“Having been a dancer for so many years,” she said, “I’m really just trying to become the kind of mentor I would have liked to have had.”

That desire is shaped by the giants in her life:

“When I think about Alvin Ailey! he was so generous and so humane. Same with William Forsythe, who I worked with for almost 10 years! a real mentor and friend. And my mother, as director of the Ailey School, established critical thinking! valuing what I’m bringing into the room. It’s like family! teachers still there 40, 50, 60 years.”

These aren’t abstract influences. They are emotional and physical memories—rooms she remembers, conversations that echo in her movement, ethics that became muscle.

Quote by Francesca Harper about carrying generational trauma and values on a textured background

Memory, Mission, and Embodied Values

For Harper, memory is inseparable from the people who raised her, trained her, and held her up. Early in our conversation, she shared a quote that, as she put it, “really resonated” with something she had felt her entire life:

“If we carry our generational trauma through generations, we can also carry our values.”

Those values are not abstractions—they are embodied inheritances she watched lived out every day:

“Being there for others, being of service to the work, lifting underrepresented voices, providing! integrated environments!”

Because of that lineage, Harper asks her dancers to meet the Ailey tradition not with reverence at a distance, but with grounded presence.

**“If you think about *Revelations*, there are real moments of acknowledging pain!
“I Been Buked, and I Been Scorned.”
That’s one of the first pieces they learn.
These young people come into it with courage—they understand the mission.”**

These values—care, service, amplification, collective integrity—are the same ones she witnessed in Alvin Ailey, Denise Jefferson, Judith Jamison, and William Forsythe. For Harper, they are not theoretical ideals. They live in the body. They shape the studio as tangibly as plis.

Deliberate Joy as a Choice

As we talked, a clear arc began to emerge—moving from memory, to lineage, to the emotional practices required to sustain artists who inherit both beauty and pain. When I shared with Harper the concern that contemporary culture often lingers in trauma, she didn't hesitate. For her, acknowledging pain is necessary, but staying inside it is not the goal.

Harper leaned into the question with the clarity of someone who has lived through grief and built something luminous on the other side:

“People love to recycle trauma and put it on display. But joy matters. I worked on a piece with choreographer Ron Brown when my mom passed, and we called it Deliberate Joy. It was about the choice of living joyfully, the choice of happiness, and the action required to get there. That idea—deliberate joy—has always stayed with me, because it puts responsibility with the individual.”

And in many ways, this philosophy of chosen joy echoes through the company she leads—through the dancers who carry their own stories, their own lineages, and their own ways of turning memory into movement. Her philosophy isn't abstract—it's something she carries into the studio each day.

A Bouquet of Cultures: The Ailey II Dancers

Across our conversation, Harper spoke about her dancers with unmistakable affection:

“We have such a wide range of dancers! Hispanic, Caucasian, African American, biracial! It's a beautiful bouquet of cultures.”

Ailey II dancers move fluidly across styles—Horton, ballet, Graham, African, Dunham, contemporary partnering, choreography, and composition. That versatility feeds directly into the company's long tradition of innovation.

**“They're multilingual in their bodies.
The common denominator is themselves.
They put on different hats for different spaces and pull out the tools they need.”**

This adaptability mirrors Harper's own fluid career and prepares her dancers for an artistic landscape where versatility is survival and curiosity is power.

Quote by Francesca Harper discussing innovation in Ailey and the importance of adaptation and self

Innovation as Inheritance

If memory forms the spine of Ailey II, innovation is its heartbeat. Listening to Harper, it becomes clear that experimentation isn't an add-on—it is the lineage. The company's history is built on artists who expanded form, embraced risk, and folded new vocabularies into the tradition. Creativity, in this world, is not departure but devotion.

Ailey is really about innovation! when *Revelations* came out, there was nothing nobody had ever seen anything like it.

Ulysses Dove choreographed for the second company! it was his jumping-off point.

Alvin would go out and work with another company and bring whatever he learned back! he invited hip-hop choreographers! innovation really is embedded in who we are.

Alvin Ailey himself absorbed ballet, modernism, world dance traditions, and even hip-hop, weaving those influences into a distinctly Ailey language.

We keep inviting new voices into the organization. Innovation is woven into the fabric of who we are.

In that sense, Harper is not reinventing Ailey II—she is extending its deepest commitments.

Holding the Future: Dancers, Choreographers, and Care

Honoring lineage also means tending to the future, and for Harper, that work happens in the studio—among dancers and choreographers still discovering the full shape of their voices.

We're bringing three world premieres. These are emerging artists! and that's what this is—development.

Ailey II is, in her words, almost like a finishing school. The dancers are exquisitely trained, but also young—open, ambitious, still forming their artistic identities.

There's a rawness to where they are in life. We have to really hold that safety.

That commitment to care is part of the inheritance, too. Emotional safety, for Harper, is as foundational. Under her direction, Ailey II becomes not just a training ground, but a place where artists learn who they are becoming.

This Season's Showcase

This year's program showcases that forward momentum with three premieres:

IN SESSION (Choreography by Rena Butler)

A collective portrait of coming of age, layered physicality, a journey of self-discovery within a community.

LIKES VS LIFE (Choreography by Renée I. McDonald)

It really unpacks social media, anxiety, depression, bullying, the need to connect and the desire to escape.

THIRD PERSON POINT OF VIEW (Choreography by Mykal Stomile) A non-traditional three-person relationship, fully functioning and fluid, then rewinds to the beginning, very topical for this generation.

The evening ends, as it often does, with **Revelations** (Choreography by Alvin Ailey), which Harper describes simply as: Mr. Ailey's masterpiece, that reverent grace and spirituality.

A male dancer in mid-air performing a leap, showcasing athleticism and grace, with long dreadlocks

Conclusion: Deliberate Joy in Dark Times

When the dancers step onstage, they carry all of this with them: the lineage, the courage, the experimentation, the cultural multiplicity, the reverence, and the deliberate joy Harper believes is still possible.

As Ailey II moves from city to city, Harper brings with her not only premieres and masterworks but a philosophy shaped by memory and guided by care. Her vision threads together the past she inherited, the present she cultivates, and the future her dancers are already shaping. Under her direction, Ailey II stands as a testament to collective memory and the radical power of joy—an insistence that the body remembers, and that the future can, in fact, be made through care.

Ailey II

Upcoming performances:

- **Jan 15: [Vilar Performing Arts Center, 68 Avondale Lane Beaver Creek, CO](#)**
- **[Jan. 16 Lone Tree Arts Center 10075 Commons Street Lone Tree, CO](#)**
- **[Jan 19 Kingsbury Hall 4:30 PM In partnership with the University of Utah's Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Week](#)**

Immediately following the MLK Week rally and march, experience the awe-inspiring movement of Ailey II! For over 50 years, Ailey II The Next Generation of Dance has merged the spirit and energy of the country's finest early-career dance talent with the passion and creative vision of today's most outstanding and emerging choreographers. Founded by Alvin Ailey in 1974, this universally-renowned company embodies his pioneering mission to establish an extended cultural community. Prepare to be captivated by an evening of electrifying performance and breathtaking movement. As the New York Times put it, "There's nothing like an evening spent with Ailey II."

Ailey II's 2026 touring company brings together an extraordinary group of artists under the leadership of Ailey II Artistic Director **Francesca Harper**, Ailey II Artistic Director Emerita **Sylvia Waters**, Rehearsal Director **Shay Bland**, Artistic Director of the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation **Alicia Graf Mack**, and Executive Director **Bennett Rink**, all building on the foundational legacy of **Alvin Ailey** himself.

This year's ensemble features dancers **Kamani Abu**, **Jada Ammons**, **Carley Cruzat Brooks**, **Meredith Brown**, **Christian Butts**, **Jennifer M. Gerken**, **Xavier Logan**, **Xhosa Scott**, **Adanna Smalls**, **Darion Turner**, **Eric J. Vidaña**, and **Jordyn White**, along with apprentices **Vic E. Davis**, **Jaydin J. De Jesus**, **Naia Neal**, and **Michelle Osanya**. Together, they embody the bold, inclusive, and transformative vision that Ailey II is forging under Harper's direction.

•Off-the-charts energy. •-*The New Yorker*

For over 50 years, Ailey II's The Next Generation of Dance has merged the spirit and energy of the country's finest early-career dance talent with the passion and creative vision of today's most outstanding and emerging choreographers. Founded by Alvin Ailey in 1974, this universally renowned company embodies his pioneering mission to establish an extended cultural community that provides dance performances, training, and community programs for all people. Under the leadership of Sylvia Waters, who served as artistic director for 38 seasons, Ailey II flourished into one of the most popular modern dance companies, combining a rigorous touring schedule with extensive community outreach programs. Today, with Artistic Director Francesca Harper at the helm, she brings fresh perspectives to Mr. Ailey's legacy, while nurturing new creative voices and propelling the company forward.

The performance on Jan 19 at UtahPresents will feature:

- **IN SESSION** (Choreography by Rena Butler)
- **THIRD PERSON POINT OF VIEW** (Choreography by Mykal Stomile)
- **LIKES VS LIFE** (Choreography by Rene I. McDonald)
- **REVELATIONS** (Choreography by Alvin Ailey)

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