

Yvonne Faith Russell

A Choreographer's Mind

The yellow-green tint of the studio at night makes Alison's skin look tan as she stands in front of Eryn and I, explaining our next steps. It's 6:45 p.m. and the tall arching windows that normally reveal the morning sunlight are covered with darkness. We're rehearsing for Dance Alabama, the student-choreographed show produced by the Dance Department at The University of Alabama. Alison stands feet agape, her hands are clasped together, and two strands of dirty blonde hair hang out of her low bun. She looks at me. "After you and Eryn do the airplane, me and you are going to do another airplane together before we stand up, and Eryn you just keep doing what you're doing. Do you know how to be the base?" She asks me. I'm normally the flyer, so the first few attempts are a little rocky. "Relax," Alison laughs, "I can see it in your eyes, you're getting freaked out." We try it another time but the result is still the same. "Don't lock your arms," Alison says, "Let them bend." We try the lift again, and this time Alison glides smoothly into the air. "Yep, exactly." She affirms. "So after that, I'm going to pull you up from the ground and just let your momentum take you into a head roll. Have you done one of those before?" I shake my head. "They're not hard, you just kind of jump, tuck your head, and roll." She demonstrates the movement effortlessly. We try a few times and after realizing I'll have too much momentum and not enough coordination to do the roll she wants, Alison changes her mind. "Whatever you just did was great, it doesn't have to be a head roll, I just want you to keep moving." Choreographing in Dance Alabama can be a unique challenge because you have to tell your friends what to do, but Alison handles it well. As a choreographer, she's more confident than I've seen her in the four years we've been friends. She's frank and tells us if we're doing something wrong, yet she still manages to be gentle and understanding.

In describing her process, Alison says, “I always come into the studio with something planned. With this dance, I came with some ideas but mostly I wanted to see what would happen.” She plays with her pinky finger while she talks, bending it forward and backwards. Her eyes light up at the chance of talking about her work, her process, and performing. “I love to make people smile, especially when I’m performing. With choreographing though...” she looks up, trying to think of the words to say, “I want people to be able to escape their realities. This dance isn’t going to make people smile, but even if it’s just for a moment, I want to be able to take the audience out of their own world.”

This will be her last opportunity to do so for a while. As a graduating senior, Alison isn’t sure what’s going to come next. “I don’t know what I want to do. I know I want to dance; I just don’t know where or what type. This is the last time I’ll have an opportunity to choreograph like this, without having to pay for people or space, so I want to take advantage of it while I can.”

In the dimly lit theatre of Morgan Auditorium I find Alison lying at the very front just below the stage. Her long legs are bent up and her hands rest underneath her head. Just last week the theatre was packed with dancers and crew bustling in and out preparing for the shows each night, but now it feels oddly intimate with just the two of us. The grand curtain is open, revealing the empty stage behind it. Without even a backdrop, the stage is naked, it almost feels as if it shouldn’t be seen like this. “Hey,” she calls without looking up, her voice slightly tired. Although the lights from the grand chandeliers are on, the theatre still feels dim with orange curtains that loom over the tall windows, blocking the bright light from outside and obscuring the time of day. The boom of my footsteps echoes as I make my way down the inclined floor, and Eryn enters in behind me.

“The lighting designer is coming today, so we’ll wait for him to get here to start rehearsing” She informs me. “He’s just getting some ideas on what to do. I’m really thinking minimal lighting for this piece. Like making the entire stage a black box.” She talks with her hands, outlining a square. The dance is complete, and now as the show approaches, it’s time to create lights that match the work. My mind flashes back to a dance she choreographed last year with lights of a similar effect. A single beam shining down on two dancers as they traveled on a diagonal for the duration of the dance. The work was very successful, being selected to perform in the Alabama Dance Festival and the Dance Alabama Tour Group, which travels across the state performing for students who often don’t have the opportunity to engage with dance. “I brought some costume options,” she says, pulling out several khaki pants and neutral colored tops. “We’ll have to see how they look later with the lights and our skin tones. I really just want to keep things simple.”

A few minutes later Brian, the lighting designer, enters, immediately striking up a conversation about the costume options, which turns into a long ramble about how he owns two pairs of the same pants. Alison attempts to start rehearsal each time the conversation comes to a natural stopping point, but Brian continues to chat. I can see the growing frustration on her face as she fakes engagement with the conversation, trying to be polite. Eryn and I head towards the stage as a hint to Brian, but he simply talks louder despite the growing distance between us. Finally, after several minutes past the start of rehearsal, Alison claps her hands and says, “Okay, let’s get started.” She exchanges a knowing glance with me and I smile. If there’s one thing Alison hates, it’s wasting time.

“I’m really thinking some orange and yellow lights for this piece.” Brian says after watching us run through the dance several times.

Alison looks unsure, “Uhhh...”

“I know you wanted minimal lighting, but this would look great with some yellows.”

“Yellow’s more of a happy color.” Alison objects, “I don’t think this is really a happy dance.” She laughs. The trio she’s choreographed is titled, “In His Name,” which explores the idea of isolation within community. It’s loosely based on the Holy Trinity, and the music is slow and legato. “We can try some different things.” Alison says, attempting to compromise.

At the end of rehearsal, Brian leaves and Eryn jets off to class, leaving just Alison and I alone. “Yellow lights, really?” She asks as we pack up our belongings. We both share a laugh.

Alison glances at the clock for the fourth time since I’ve been here and looks at the door, “Come on Brian, where are you?” Its 4:58 and we’re scheduled to rehearse with Brian from 5:00-5:30 so he can program the light cues since Alison will be out of town during her assigned lighting tech time. There’s one thing you have to understand about the dance world: if you’re early, you’re on time. If you’re on time, you’re late. If you’re late, well... You should just never be late. The next group scheduled to rehearse at 5:30 has already begun to trickle in and Alison looks worriedly at the clock again. She catches my eye and makes a face, letting out a nervous laugh.

A bright beam of light shines into the dull theater as the door opens and Lyndell, our technical supervisor, glides in. His choice hat of the day is an off-white military cap tilted slightly to the left per usual. He gives us half nods and greets us by our respective nicknames, “Apollo” and “Shih Tzu.”

“What are you guys doing?” Lyndell asks, noting that rehearsals don’t typically start until 5:30.

“We’re doing my lighting tech today, since I’ll be out of town on Wednesday, remember?” Alison says. “We’re waiting on Brian.” She adds with a sarcastic laugh.

“Where is he?” Lyndell asks, making his way to the light board. “He can’t do anything until the system is set up.” He scoffs. The preparation required to work the light board is not exactly long, but it’s definitely not something you want to do when you’re crunched for time. It involves running back and forth flipping breakers, plugging in outlets, turning keys, pressing buttons backstage, and manually bringing up the board, all of which must be done in a particular order.

“I don’t know,” she throws up her hands in a laugh. The side door opens, and the bright light illuminates the theater again. Brian bustles in wearing blue painters’ overalls. Binders and loose papers are stuffed under his stocky arm. The clock reads 5:01. He’s mumbling words I can’t make out between the chatter of the room and Alison’s exclamation of happiness at his arrival. Immediately Eryn and I follow Alison to the stage while Brian shuffles to the light board where Lyndell is tampering with the instruments.

“Who’s been in here?” Lyndell groans loudly, causing the whole theatre to go silent. He grumbles to Brian about something being out of order on the board. Alison’s eyes widen and she grits her teeth as she looks at the clock. 5:06. There’s no time for things to go amiss.

Luckily, the crisis is resolved speedily, and the light board is up and running. Alison joins Brian to see the lights from the audience. “Can you all go to the improv section?” She asks. She wants to see if the spotlight will illuminate all of us during that moment. She has us run through

the dance several times, stopping at different moments to converse with Brian about which lights will look best on stage. To her pleasure, the dance will not feature any yellow lighting.

Inside the dressing room, girls bustle in and out of the three adjacent rooms, carrying costumes, perfecting their makeup, and running up and down the stairs to the stage. In the seniors' room, Alison sits on the counter engaged in the group conversation whose topic changes every few minutes, ranging from at-home ear piercings to supernatural encounters. It's the first dress rehearsal for the show. Her hair and makeup are done, and she enjoys her last few social moments before she heads downstairs to the stage. At this point, her work as choreographer is complete, and she transitions into the role of performer as she prepares to dance in her own work.