

CULTURE

# Changing Lives One Dance Step At A Time

Some international theater companies, when on a global tour, arrive, deliver and depart. Not so with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

WORDS ROBYN VON GELSAU



Photo by Richard Calmes

**“I EXPERIENCED SOMETHING SO TRAUMATIC THAT I MADE A DECISION NOT TO SPEAK. DANCE IS WHAT GOT ME TO SPEAK.”**



Photo by Paul Kellnik

AAADT's Boykin and Aisha Mitchell

**“I** will never again say I can't do anything!” declares 14-year-old Kyle Grant from Mitchells Plain, a crime-riddled township of Cape Town. This young dance student has just witnessed the exhilarating New York-based Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's (AAADT) mini-performance for school children at the city's largest theater.

Similar sentiments were repeated by youngsters throughout the weeks this modern dance company was on tour in South Africa. By night, the professional dancers performed to standing ovations by paying audiences. By day, the artistes, many who have danced on the biggest stages of the world, taught in cramped classrooms and community halls. They traveled into townships to welcome groups of wide-eyed youngsters into theater rehearsal studios for hour-long lessons.

Over and over they would repeat the maxim which company founder, the late Alvin Ailey, who in 1958 created the dance company rooted in African-American culture, lived by: “Dance came from the people. We must take it back to the people.” The dance company does just this. It moves past the plush seats and well-heeled audiences and down the byways to halls with broken windows and children with holes in their socks but dance in their souls.

On a damp spring morning at Bonga Primary School in Gugulethu, a township

Photo by Andrew Eccles

Ailey's 2015 tour to South Africa - Boykin taking a master class



20 minutes from the Cape Town city center, children crowd into a studio created in a small shipping container. Young students of iKapa Dance Theatre gaze at the elegant form of Samuel Lee Roberts, company dancer and former student of the prestigious Juilliard School in New York. His energy is infectious and soon he has them doing head rolls, rises and turns.

“Are we having fun? You guys are brilliant, when I leave you are going to take my job!” he says to the bouncing, and giggling, children.

Artistic Director, Robert Battle, whose elegant shoes fill the huge ones left by Ailey and his successor, the acclaimed Judith Jamison, watches from a corner.

This tour is his first to Africa and one that has touched him.

“The community outreach program has been cathartic. It's definitely the most crystallized and distilled version of what Alvin Ailey wanted the company to be about. Every dancer has just cried or been completely transformed and informed about what they can be. This lets us know that what we do matters,” he says.

Down a corridor, former gangster, Yankela Bambata (21), is helping AAADT dancer, Michael McBride (21), translate his instructions into Xhosa. He eases between arching arms and squeezes past desks pushed against the wall. A senior dancer with iKapa, Bambata has a moment of disbelief that he is assisting AAADT dancers.

“This means a lot to me. I've been Googling them and watching their videos... When I saw them arrive I thought: ‘Is this real?’”

Bambata, who says he was born to dance, was



Photo by Andrew Eccles

This is the beauty of the dance theater's program.

It reaches out and offers something beyond how to extend a leg and balance on tiptoe. It gives children hope. It also imprints the fact that with effort there is much to gain. It's a message that *Revelations*, Ailey's masterpiece, with its theme of moving from slavery to freedom, does every time it is performed.

Hope Boykin, a company dancer for 15 years, may be short in stature but she is a giant in spirit. The downbeat exterior of the hall in Cuyahoga, where she is conducting a masterclass to senior students, belies what is happening inside. Boykin is guiding them through a series of moves from *Revelations*.

"This is your drama, your fears, your troubles and you are going to get through them," she urges. "And ladies, make sure you don't get stuck behind. Remember: small is a state of mind!"

And with that, heads lift, confidence grows and the energy shifts from people being told what to do to dancers finding their own feet and wings to fly through the air.

Theo Ndirndwa, co-founder of iKapa with his wife Tanya Arshamian, reflects on what the AAADT program means.

"It's like seeing ourselves in the future. We want the children to get that from seeing them. I trained in the townships through NGOs. I've been down that route. Dance has the power to change individuals. It teaches discipline. It's very hard work. We come from a hard country. The government must provide rooves over our heads, but it is art that fuels the individual to carry a community."

Four days later, the city's Artscape Theatre is brimming with hundreds of schoolchildren. The velvet curtain rises revealing a dancer slowly moving in a twinkling dress to Duke Ellington's rhythms.

"Yoh!" shouts a youngster. "Is it real? I can't believe it!"

Chrisbende Maarman, 17, who has traveled overnight on a bus from a small town 500 kilometers away, is ecstatic.

"It was amazing to see them live. It has inspired us to be and do better. If I work hard I know I can do it!"

It is these moments that transform lives. Thomas Coit, AAADT Senior Director of Marketing and Creative Content, knows this and is a happy man. He has watched Ailey's vision unfold in South Africa.

"Even if just one child walks away and thinks 'maybe I can be creative' we have succeeded. If we can help them think of other possibilities and just give them the self-confidence, it has worked." **EW**

caught at the age of 13, like many other township children, in the violent grip of a gang. But dance would prove to be his escape.

"It gave me the power of knowing what I want. When I dance everything just goes from my mind. Whatever you are going through, dance will help you get through it," he says.

It is something that is unwittingly echoed by AAADT dancer, Jeroboam Bozeman. Tall and muscular, he co-teaches a class of Amoyo Performing Arts Foundation dancers at another venue the following day.

"When did you start dancing?" asks a student after the teaching session.

Bozeman's story floors the children.

"For years I didn't speak. I was mute. I was silent. I experienced something so traumatic that I made a decision not to speak. Dance is what got me to speak – nothing is more fulfilling than what dance brought me. But you have to be constantly working, every day, 24/7 to be great," he says.