

Chicago Tribune

Chicago native Travon M. Williams among Ailey II dancers to perform in University Park

By: Jessi Virtusio

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While attending The Chicago High School for the Arts, Travon M. Williams hoped to eventually join Ailey II, which is billed as The Next Generation of Dance.

“When I was in high school, we wrote letters and we couldn’t open them until graduation. In my freshman letter I wrote, ‘I hope you get in to Juilliard or Ailey II.’ Actually I got wait-listed for Juilliard and I’m in Ailey II,” said Williams, who is in his second season with Ailey II.

“It was a crazy, full circle moment. I was grateful that I worked hard to get to where I am, and I’m grateful for all the help that I had to get where I am and the training that I had as well.”

Ailey II travels from New York to University Park to perform on Oct. 15 at Governors State University’s Center for Performing Arts.

“It’s going to be a great program,” said Williams, who grew up on Chicago’s West Side in the Austin community and now lives in New York City’s Bronx borough. “It’s going to be very moving.” The performance by Ailey II, which is the second company of Alvin Ailey

American Dance Theater, includes “mediAcation” by Elizabeth Roxas-Dobrich.

“She’s a former member of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. The piece explores communication and the impact of social media. It’s showing a media connection by the use of ropes,” Williams said.

“Six dancers move in sync with one another before merging into three duets coupled with music by various artists including Nicholas Britell and Alberto Iglesias.” The Ailey II program also features an excerpt of William Forsythe’s “Enemy in the Figure,” which was created in Germany for his ensemble, Ballet Frankfurt, and has been performed in full at major venues worldwide.

“This excerpt pushes us artistically, mentally and physically,” Williams said.

“They’re thinking about all these different ways to explore your body and go beyond comfortability. The costume is a lot of shingles like fringe. It’s cool and the lighting is cool. It’s amazing.”

“The Hunt” by Robert Battle, artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and restaged by Elisa Clark is also part of Ailey II’s Southland show.

“This ballet examines the relationships between modern sport and the rituals of gladiators, revealing the aggressive side. We’re screaming and growling in certain parts of the piece. We have skirts. That will be fun. It’s a lot of stomping and jumping,” Williams said.

The touring repertoire also features the Ailey II debut of Andrea Miller, artistic director of Gallim Dance, via “Psūkhe,” which is described as an Ancient Greek word meaning “life’s breath, spirit and soul” and the origin for the English word “psyche.” The piece is set to Nicolás Jaar’s electronic music. “Andrea Miller is known for versatile, imaginative work,” said Williams, who grew up doing hip hop dance at first. “‘Psūkhe’ is colorful.”

His formal dance training started in the Joffrey Community Engagement program under Pierre Lockett, who invited Williams to join The Joffrey Ballet’s Exelon Strobel Dancers program in downtown Chicago after seeing Williams in Joffrey’s Middle School Dance Clubs in-school program.

“What made me want to join the Ailey organization as a whole was when I was 14 my dance mentor, Pierre Lockett, took me to see Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at Auditorium Theatre. For the first time I saw Ailey do ‘Revelations,’” Williams said.

"I noticed how they moved. It was soulful. I loved how they moved the audience without touching them and to see people of all backgrounds and African American women and men showing techniques I'd never seen before. I knew that I needed to be there."

Williams also trained at Chicago Multi-Cultural Dance Center, which is led by Homer Hans Bryant; Ballet Chicago and Deeply Rooted Dance Theater in Chicago.

"The storytelling behind dance is so beautiful. It's so powerful. You can make people literally cry or you can inspire someone or you can change someone's life just by dancing. You never know what dance can do for someone," Williams said.

"Just by me seeing the Ailey show, now I'm part of the legacy. Now I'm in a space where I can inspire the next generation and I've always wanted to do that. I've always wanted to give back to the community and help the younger kids who don't have many resources.

"I wanted to be someone that any child can look up to no matter the color of their skin, ethnicity or nationality. I wanted to inspire people to know that no matter what someone tells you, you can do it."

In 2021 he appeared under the name Tray Tisci as part of House of Tisci on Season 2 of the HBO Max voguing reality competition series "Legendary."

"It was really different because you're dealing with people's emotions and attitudes but it was also very fun," Williams said.

"Being in front of the camera, behind the camera, seeing how productions work and how much goes into filming the show, it was a great experience.

"I'm taking everything that I learned from that show and bringing (it to) my life — practicing patience and organization and staying in the moment and not beating yourself up when things get hard."

Williams noted that Ailey II artistic director Francesca Harper is an encouraging leader.

"What I love about her is she's a great visionary. She pushes us artistically, mentally and physically. She makes us ask questions and explore our bodies. We do a lot of improvisation and it really helps us," he said.

"She does not allow us to beat ourselves up or get angry with ourselves. She will tell us to be in the moment, be yourself, and not look at anyone else and compare ourselves. She helps all of us bring our own artistry out of each other."

Ailey II

When: 7:30 p.m. Oct. 15

Where: Governors State University's Center for Performing Arts, 1 University Parkway, University Park

Tickets: \$45-\$59 adults; \$20 ages 14 and younger

Information: 708-235-2222; [govst.edu/about/center for performing arts](https://govst.edu/about/center-for-performing-arts)