

The Virginian-Pilot

Virginia dancer who fulfilled dream of joining Alvin Ailey's company to perform in Hampton Roads this week

By: Colin Warren-Hicks

April 23, 2023



Patrick Coker sat mesmerized in a cushy chair in an audience watching the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater perform.

The 12-year-old saw a celebration of the human experience in those dancers' movements. Struck by their beauty, he had never felt such awe. The feeling soon turned into longing and a revelation. He knew what he wanted for his future: to be an Alvin Ailey dancer on the stage, instead of in his seat. And although it took a little over 12 more years to achieve, Coker will perform in Hampton Roads this week as a member of Alvin Ailey.

The legendary troupe will be at the Ferguson Center for the Arts in Newport News Tuesday and at Chrysler Hall in Norfolk Friday through Sunday as part of the Virginia Arts Festival. It will not be Coker's first time at the Ferguson.

Coker, 29, grew up in Chester and often took childhood visits to his grandparents in Newport News. He'd sometimes enjoy the treat of getting to go to the Ferguson to watch a performance — similar to the one he'll be in.

"And I actually performed in 'The Nutcracker' there when I was in high school," he said, laughing. But Coker is no-nonsense when speaking about the work of Alvin Ailey. He believes in the company's work to his core.

Ailey was a luminary. He founded his multiracial company in 1958 and blended modern dance, ballet and jazz, spreading Black culture and the Black experience all over the world. In 2008, Congress passed a resolution commending the company for its service "as a vital American cultural ambassador to the world" and for "using the beauty and humanity of African-American heritage and other cultures to unite people of all ages, races, and backgrounds." It also called it one of the premier dance companies in existence.

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has performed in over 70 countries for more than an estimated 21 million, including at the 1996 and 2002 Olympic Games.

As a teenager, Coker knew he'd have to move to New York to be an Alvin Ailey dancer. He enrolled in the fine arts program at the Ailey School at Fordham University in New York City's Upper West Side. He apprenticed with the Ailey II company before graduating, staying in New York and dancing with the Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet before spending three seasons with the Jessica Lang Dance. He has also performed with the Mark Morris Dance Group.

Then, in 2019, he auditioned and was finally accepted into Alvin Ailey.

"I think there's something about the space and the community that's just so inclusive and beautiful," he said of the company. He expects Hampton Roads audiences will feel uplifted by the shows.

"And a sense of purpose in their identity and a sense of feeling good about being here and being a human."

Colin Warren-Hicks, 919-818-8139, colin.warrenhicks@virginiamedia.com

If you go

Newport News: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Ferguson Center for the Arts, 1 Avenue of the Arts, Newport News.

Norfolk: 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 3 p.m. Sunday at Chrysler Hall, 215 St. Paul's Blvd., Norfolk.

Tickets: Start at \$18.75

Detail: vafest.org