

THE DAILY CALIFORNIAN

[Solomon Dumas talks Alvin Ailey, reaching youth through dance](#)

By: Lauren Harvey

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Back in 2001, Solomon Dumas' mother was listening to the car radio when she heard an interview with some of the dancers from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Her son had planned to enroll in theater camp, but after hearing about AileyCamp — a summer dance program for youth — she decided to enroll him there instead.

Dumas quickly fell in love with dance at AileyCamp. Outside the confines of language, dance provided an outlet for expression and healing.

"It felt natural to me," Dumas said in an interview with The Daily Californian. "It felt like something that I needed to do at the time."

Early on, Dumas also recognized the similarities between himself and Mr. Ailey. Both were raised by single moms and discovered dance in their teenage years. Dumas recalls becoming "immediately obsessed" with the company and all that it stood for.

"I thought that the dancers were the most beautiful people that I had ever seen," Dumas said. "I've never seen Black people move in that way and look that way. And they just seemed like they were having so much fun, but they seemed so powerful and they seemed so liberated."

In 2016, Dumas became the first former AileyCamper to join the company. He has been described by The New York Times as resembling a "young Ailey" and even became the face of the 2019-2020 season poster. Since joining the company, Dumas has been joined by two other AileyCamp alumni: Christopher Taylor and De'Anthony Vaughan.

"It's inspiring to see and I am happy to have been joined by them," Dumas said. "(AileyCamp) has had such an impact on youth— underrepresented youth — that it inspired them to do the work to achieve such a high achievement (...) as professional artists at the top of their field in this place," Dumas said.

To this day, Dumas continues to engage in Alvin Ailey's educational mission, specifically by teaching youth about dance and the history of the company. He has taught for the Ailey Extension, led educational performances and spoken in panel discussions.

On Friday, April 5, he will moderate a school-time performance at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall, during which students will have the opportunity to see excerpts from some of the dances and learn some of the choreography to Ailey classic *Revelations*. Dumas also noted that there's an AileyCamp in Berkeley and Oakland, which runs this year from June 11 to July 26 and is open to youth ages 11 to 14.

"There are a lot of conversations circling around about history, what should be shared, who should be sharing, the language that we use to think about history," Dumas said. "The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is an important part of our country's history. And so it gives youngsters an opportunity to learn more about themselves reflected on stage and the possibilities."

Alvin Ailey comes to Berkeley each year, and Dumas considers Zellerbach Hall a "second home." This year, the company will perform a variety of programs with choreography from Ronald K. Brown, Amy Hall Garner and, of course, Ailey himself. In addition to accompaniment by jazz pianist Duke Ellington and composer Irving Berlin, performances will include music by Lauryn Hill, Kendrick Lamar, Summer Walker and more.

Looking forward to the performances, Dumas expresses particular excitement about performing Ailey's choreography. "(Ailey's) work taps into the African American cultural expression, the African American experience," he said. "It humanizes

that experience so that other people who aren't necessarily African American understand what it is that they're saying, and they feel welcome to participate and they feel like they understand. So his work connects all humans."

However, Dumas also appreciates the way Ailey made a point to invite a diverse range of artists to express themselves and share their points of view.

"Mr. Ailey had his point of view and his own perspectives, but he knew that other people — other artists, other choreographers, other composers had something important to say, and he gave them the platform to say it," Dumas said. "And no matter what performance you go to, you're going to walk away differently than when you came into the theater in a positive way and an inspired way — an uplifted way."

Looking forward, Dumas plans to continue dancing and educating with Alvin Ailey. When he first began to dance, he was told that it was not common for dancers to continue their profession past the age of 30, but now, Dumas doesn't believe that's necessarily true.

"I'm 35 now going on 36. I'm still dancing in the company," Dumas said. "And I don't have a plan to leave tomorrow."