

Former AileyCamper, now Ailey member Solomon Dumas affirms program's value

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By: Zita Allen



Christopher Taylor (far right) joins Ailey Campers for run-through as Ailey Camp Director Nasha Thomas conducts rehearsal for Aug. 11 performance. CONTRIBUTED

Thursday, Aug. 11, more than 100 youngsters will take the stage at Hostos Center for Arts & Culture for a festive performance that caps their six-week summer at CAS/AileyCamp New York. They will showcase skills nurtured by the innovative program that combines dance and classes in creative communication and personal development to give kids ages 11 to 14 tools that help them reach their full potential by encouraging self-awareness, self-esteem and discipline. One of the youngsters who will take center stage during the program is 16-year-old Christopher Taylor. Taylor is a former AileyCamper in Newark who has spent the summer participating in an Ailey School summer intensive training program.

Recently, Taylor sat down for a brief conversation about the AileyCamp experience with Solomon Dumas, a new member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, who got his first taste of dance at AileyCamp in his hometown of Chicago. Both were on a brief rehearsal break—Taylor from preparing for the AileyCamp New York's Aug. 11 final performance for the summer and Dumas from rehearsals for the AAADT 2016 season that kicks off with a national tour and culminates in December with its New York City Center season.

The skill, discipline and joy of dance nurtured at CAS/AileyCamp manifests itself in kids lives in a variety of ways. For Dumas, it ignited a laser-focused determination to become a professional dancer. Taylor's path is still unfolding, but his attention-grabbing performance during the AAADT 2015 Lincoln Center gala in a piece d'occasion featuring AileyCampers, Ailey School students and Ailey II company members captured attention. Now, he's taking part an Ailey summer intensive and rehearsing for the Aug. 11 CAS/AileyCamp performance while doing all he can to follow in Dumas' footsteps.

AileyCamp was clearly a good place to start. National AileyCamp Director Nasha Thomas has described this remarkable program as part of choreographer Alvin Ailey's brilliant vision decades ago. Since its inception in 1989 in Kansas City, Mo., AileyCamp has evolved into a year-round program reaching thousands of youngsters in cities across the country, as far away as Berkeley, Calif. and as close as Newark, N.J. Some young campers have even gone on like Dumas to become professional dancers.

Taylor said he has attended AileyCamp for three summers, beginning in 2011. When he sat down with Dumas to discuss his dream of a career as a dancer, it is possible to hear echoes of sentiments expressed by Ta-Nehisi Coates open letter, "Between the World and Me." Sure, Coates open letter is to his son, but this intergenerational exchange, these words of wisdom between the 27-year-old Dumas and 16-year-old Taylor—two young Black males at different points in their journey—resonates. These two are, after all, young African-American men who could, like so many, encounter what calls "an array of lethal puzzles and strange perils that seem to rise up from the asphalt itself" on streets that "transform every ordinary day into a series of trick questions, and every incorrect answer risks a beat down, a shooting or a pregnancy." Following their dreams is no easy journey, as Langston Hughes pointed out years ago. Every inspiration and affirmation is invaluable, and institutions such as AileyCamp can make a profound difference.