



Alvin Ailey Dance Troupe Brings Dance Education To Paris' Underserved Communities

By: Eleanor Beardsley

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TRANSCRIPT

MICHEL MARTIN, HOST:

Now to Paris where audiences are enjoying the first stop of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's European tour. For almost 60 years, the company has been performing modern dance inspired by the African-American experience. (SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MARTIN: Wherever the company goes, it also reaches out to underserved communities to offer dance education. NPR's Eleanor Beardsley recently visited a master class in Paris.

ELEANOR BEARDSLEY, BYLINE: While the Alvin Ailey dancers perform nightly to urbane audiences at a concert hall on the western edge of Paris, another scene unfolds during the day across town at the Georges Bizet public conservatory.

MATTHEW RUSHING: (Speaking French).

BEARDSLEY: In a large dance studio lined with mirrors, longtime Alvin Ailey dancer and choreographer Matthew Rushing is giving a lesson - a master class to a group of preteen dancers in black leggings and bare feet. Rushing says he first became inspired at about their age in an afterschool program in California. Then he saw a production of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater.

RUSHING: I will never forget. There were two ballets that really touched me deeply. That's when I, for the first time, realized that you can see yourself in art.

BEARDSLEY: Reaching out to young people that may not have the chance to go see a ballet continues to be a central part of the dance group's philosophy even when they're on tour abroad.

RUSHING: Because the more we share our stories, meaning African-Americans, Latin Americans and any kind of culture sharing their own story, we see our stories in everybody else's story. And it reaches past culture and speaks to spirit.

Do you know why I am asking you to do it by yourself?

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: (Speaking French).

BEARDSLEY: When he lacks the French vocabulary, Rushing relies on an interpreter to communicate with the eager young dancers.

RUSHING: Exactement, exactement. Tell them you can't be a dancer and be timid.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: (Speaking French).

BEARDSLEY: The American Embassy in Paris connected the Ailey Company with these kids. Emmanuel Oriol is the director of the conservatory in this working-class neighborhood.

EMMANUEL ORIOL: (Through interpreter) What I appreciate about Matthew is he is extremely encouraging with his students. He is rigorous, but he also motivates them with positive words. This positive motivational American culture really inspires them to dance better.

BEARDSLEY: Thirteen-year-old Kiara Montoyasinera says she simply loves this dance class.

KIARA MONTOYASINERA: Like, Alvin Ailey, it's one of the biggest dance companies in the world. I just find it incredible just being here and doing this and this person coming to France and giving us classes.

BEARDSLEY: Twelve-year-old Matteo Prevosto says he dreams of being a dancer and signed up right away when he heard who was coming to teach them.

MATTEO PREVOSTO: (Speaking French).

BEARDSLEY: "It's pretty stressful when it's your turn to dance alone, and he tells everyone to watch you," says Prevosto. "But this teaches us how to have more confidence in ourselves. We're really improving a lot."

MATTEO: (Speaking French).

BEARDSLEY: And with boundless energy and enthusiasm, Matthew Rushing pushes them further. Eleanor Beardsley, NPR News, Paris.

(SOUNDBITE OF ALVIN AILEY'S "I BEEN BUKED") Transcript provided by NPR, Copyright NPR.