FIFTY YEARS OF DEVELOPING DREAMS AT THE AILEY SCHOOL

By Jen Peters

In 1979, a young New York City boy met Alvin Ailey at his public elementary school during a dance workshop; unbeknownst to him it was an audition. Then nine-year-old Troy Powell had no idea who Mr. Ailey was and no formal dance training, although he came from a large African American family where dance was interwoven into their everyday home life. "I was handpicked to join the first children’s program at The Ailey School, and the experience made a huge impact and changed my life," says Powell, who continued to climb the ranks through the School’s professional division, Ailey II, and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. He succeeded Sylvia Waters in 2012 as Ailey II’s Artistic Director.

To launch a celebration of 50 years of training excellence at the School, Powell is creating a pièce d’occasion for the June 13th Ailey Spirit Gala at Lincoln Center inspired by this journey and
spotlighting all the different programs. Another of the special programs during the engagement honors the iconic artistry of Carmen de Lavallade, who attended high school with Mr. Ailey in Los Angeles and introduced him to his first dance class.

Now led by co-directors Tracy Inman and Melanie Person, The Ailey School’s model of versatile dance training rooted in Horton technique, Graham-based modern, and ballet speaks for itself. The majority of Ailey company dancers trained at the School, and Ailey students grace stages with major dance companies, Broadway shows, The Rockettes, and appear in films and television programs. Notably, former Ailey II dancer and The Ailey School/Fordham University BFA graduate Ephraim Sykes received a 2019 Tony nomination for his role in the new musical Ain’t Too Proud. Ailey students have also excelled through innovative choreographic careers, including Ailey/Fordham BFA graduate Maya Taylor, whose work was recently featured in Solange’s music video Almeda, in the Netflix series Dirt, and the TNT show Claws.

“Training at Ailey influenced how hard I work on everything I create, whether it’s a simple 8-counts for a TV show or a full-length ballet—I learned not just about doing the step, but about developing my artistry.”
A Creative Home

As Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater’s 60th anniversary season comes to a close, this summer’s Lincoln Center programming highlights lives impacted by the Ailey legacy, a testament to the power of Mr. Ailey’s mission to give dance back to the people. He founded the School in Brooklyn in 1969, making professional dance training accessible to all students. The School thrived because of the community of people, the inspiring teachers dedicated to dance. However, up until 2005 they did not have a permanent home.

“We moved every ten years, from the East side in the 50’s, down to 44th and Broadway, and up to the more intimate studios of 61st street on the West side,” reminisces Ana Marie Forsythe, The Ailey School Chair of the Horton department. “I know that Alvin dreamed about owning a building, having the right space for dance—Judith Jamison really made that building happen and knew what he wanted.” The 87,000-square foot Joan Weill Center for Dance is now the largest building dedicated to dance in New York City—the dance capital of the world—with 16 studios, a 275-seat theater, and an estimated 200,000 people dancing their way through the building each year.

Versatile artist Darrell Grand Moultrie, who has choreographed for superstars like Beyoncé and ballet companies domestically and internationally, describes The Ailey School as his creative home. “Denise Jefferson first brought me in, she made Ailey
home for me—it’s my base of support, they trust my process and allow me to be creative,” says Moultrie. He says the dancers at Ailey have vitality and are “laced with fire;” they are always ready for a challenge.

**A Personal Homage**

Moultrie is bringing a world premiere to the Ailey stage centered on the essence of gratitude, not just for Ailey but for his third grade NYC public school teacher who introduced him to the Ailey company, along with Dance Theatre of Harlem and New York City Ballet. “Seeing Revelations and Night Creature really changed me! I went home and started making up dances with kids in my neighborhood,” Moultrie recalls. “It showed me I could be more than just one thing as a black man.”

His debut creation for the first company (he’s choreographed 3 works for Ailey II and over 14 works for Ailey School students) premieres on opening night, Wednesday, June 12, and features original music. “I am grateful for what Mr. Ailey started; to have a premiere at Lincoln Center is a full circle moment for me as a New Yorker,” says Moultrie. “I am living proof of the effects of arts in education.”

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Reflecting on his own personal journey, Powell choreographed a ballet that follows five male dancers—from Ailey’s junior division, Ailey Camp, professional division, Ailey II, and Solomon Dumas from Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater—through an abstracted, transformational narrative. Dumas’s own story mirrors Powell’s, as he was introduced to dance through Ailey Camp and followed the path into the first company in 2016. “I think Mr. Ailey instilled in his students a profound work ethic, a hunger and passion for the art form,” Powell describes. “This work for me is passing on his legacy through my journey.”

Jen Peters is a graduate of The Ailey School/Fordham University BFA program, under the direction of Denise Jefferson and Ana Marie Forsythe. She danced professionally with Jennifer Muller/The Works and is a writer for Dance Magazine and Dance Teacher. She is currently pursuing an MFA in Dance at University of Michigan.

Below, AAADT’s Jacqueline Green and Solomon Dumas in Ronald K. Brown’s The Call.