

Body Doubles

By: Elizabeth Barber

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Homophobia! Some of those things were going on when I was growing up, but not like today."

Powell, who is fifty, is the artistic director of Ailey II, a junior company whose members often go on to dance in the main troupe. The cast for "Testimony" included children as young as seven, many from disadvantaged backgrounds. (Seventy per cent of Ailey II students are people of color.) He surveyed the ensemble: six girls under ten, preening for the mirrors in hot-pink leotards, and four boys without the attention span for mirrors.

Powell folded his hands in front of him, his toes tensely pointed outward. "Stomachs lifted!" he told his charges. "I see your lunch!" He put on some melancholy string music, re-clasped his hands, and watched as the children acted out his earliest years in ballet: Jayson jogged onstage, bouncing an invisible basketball with the guys while eyeing the girls doing pliés.

Powell has a bald head and a face that is unlined, except for two forehead furrows that deepen when he delivers critiques. "That was not bad," he said, after a run-through. "It was not scrumptious, though."

Powell was nine years old when Alvin Ailey visited his Manhattan public school, to hold auditions for his children's-dance program. "All I saw was this huge man who was, like, this god!" Powell recalled. Twenty years earlier, Ailey had founded a multiracial modern-dance company, which performed at the inaugurations of both a President (Jimmy Carter) and Studio 54. Powell had six older siblings. His mother, a nursery-school teacher, was raising them alone in East Harlem. "All my siblings worked to support my mother, who was supporting us," he said. He was offered a place in the school on full scholarship. "I always say, dance chose me," he said.

In the rehearsal room, Powell asked how many of the dancers had ever performed before. "This is a big deal," he told them. "People are looking at you. People are inspired by you."

"People are paying for you!" one of the girls shouted.

Powell looked at her for a moment before saying, "You are going to be a lawyer."

After class, he returned the young

performers to their parents and took an elevator to a studio upstairs, for a rehearsal of the piece's second part. The double in this section was a cheerful fifteen-year-old named Christian. This cast was from AileyCamp, a free sum-



Troy Powell

mer arts program from which the Ailey School recruits. (Solomon Dumas, who was playing Powell's oldest look-alike, was the first dancer to go from the camp to the top company.)

"Why do you all look so tired?" Powell asked. "Are you eating stuff that gives you energy?"

"Doritos!" a bunch of voices replied.

"No!" Powell said. "Vegetables! Nuts!" (Later, he said, "Once they leave, Lord knows if they even have a meal at home.")

At the rehearsal, much of his feedback sounded like motivational speaking. ("Run like you're going somewhere!") "Everyone in this building needs to hear a story," he said. "They need to hear about everyone's different path, and how they got to where they are. Nine times out of ten, it's through a struggle."

A photographer had been taking pictures as Christian and another boy practiced split jumps. Afterward, she showed Powell a shot of the two young men floating in the air, legs spread like wings. He stepped back and smiled. "See," he said, as the teen-agers crowded around the camera. "It's possible. We have the receipts."

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When the choreographer Troy Powell was a student at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's school, more than forty years ago, he was struck, he remembered recently, by "these men that looked like me, these men that danced!" The other night, when he again found himself moved by a young man who looked like him, he was less surprised: Powell had handpicked the boy for the resemblance.

The occasion for the body double was Powell's newest work, "Testimony," choreographed for the Ailey School's fiftieth-anniversary gala, at Lincoln Center. It tells Powell's story in five parts, with five dancers of ascending age. He was at the school's midtown studios, rehearsing his youngest doppelgänger, a twelve-year-old named Jayson. "You can still fight through adversity, and make it, if you just stay focussed," Powell said. "Especially now, everything that's going on in politics, global warming, racism, sexism! It's just a lot, you know?"