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 their earliest years in ballet: Jayson jogged onstage, bouncing an invisible basketball with the guys while eying the girls doing plies.

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 scrumptions, 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 summer 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 teenagers crowded around the camera. "It’s possible. We have the receipts."

—Elizabeth Barber