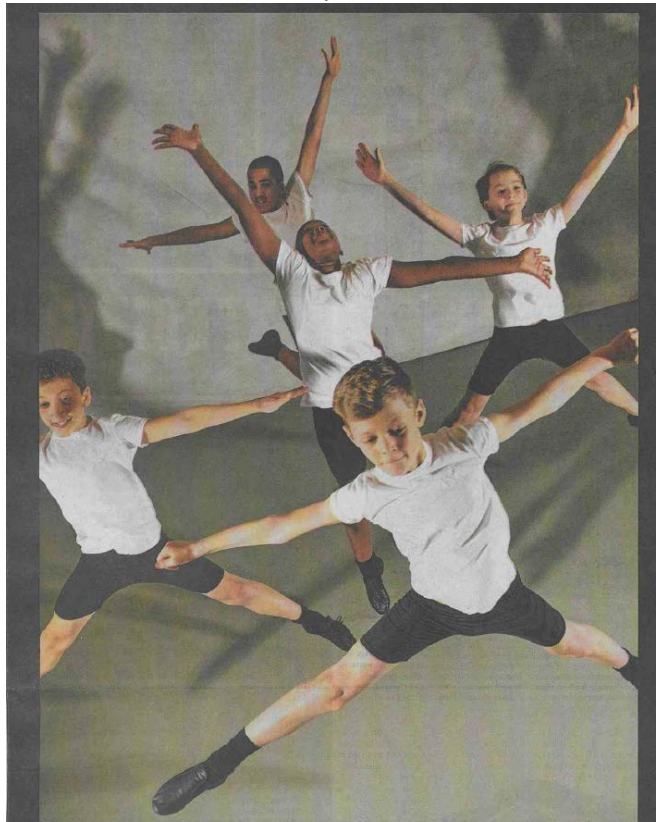


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A Dance Class Just For Boys

By: Gia Kourlas
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Dancers in the Ailey Athletic Boys Dance Program during a recent jazz class. They are currently about 6 to 18 years old.

A DANCE CLASS JUST FOR BOYS

BALLET. JAZZ. WEST AFRICAN. THEY DO IT ALL.

BY GIA KOURLAS - PHOTOGRAPH BY Yael Malka

Dahsir Hausif began dancing the way a lot of young boys do: “My mom just dragged me to an audition one day,” he says, “and I was like, O.K., I guess I’m doing this now.”

He was 6. At the time, he says, surfing was his main love. But that audition at the Ailey School in New York, from which the most talented of students go on to join the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and other famous dance companies, changed his life. What immediately pulled him in was its dedicated boys’ program. That meant that he wouldn’t be the only boy in a classroom full of girls, which is still often the case in dance training across the country. Now Dahsir, who is 17, has his heart set on pursuing a career in dance. “The artistic part fulfills my personality and the things in my life that I need to express,” he says. And the program, he adds, is “pretty special — you can build that brotherhood.”

Dance might still be seen as a career for girls, but that is changing as boys learn how athletic and fun it is. Training doesn’t necessarily mean that a student will become a professional, but it does give a boy — or girl — the kind of discipline

that carries over into other parts of life. And there are other pluses: You make friends. You push yourself physically. You get to feel more comfortable in your body. “In ballet, we’re doing what our teacher calls ballet gym,” says Finnegan Mack, 11. “That’s where we have to get our muscles ready to do bigger things.”

The Ailey Athletic Boys Dance Program, which began in 2001, offers free classes to boys between the ages of 7 and 18. Until around age 12, their classes feature only other boys; after that, they’re mixed in with the girls. Even though the foundation of the program is ballet, it focuses on creating well-rounded dancers: West African, modern dance and tap are also part of the curriculum. “It’s cool to know what you can or can’t do,” Finnegan says, “and then learn how to do it.”

Mikah Urbano, 11, agrees. Ballet, he says, is about controlling the body; with jazz or West African dance, you can be more free. And he has learned something deeper, beyond the mastery of technique: that dancing is like reading a book. “When you’re using your imagination, you can feel how the characters feel, right?” he says. “When you’re watching someone dance, you can really feel how they feel.” ♦

‘It’s pretty special — you can build that brotherhood.’

Dahsir Hausif, 17