



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater dancers making their dreams come true

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By Stereo Williams

It goes without saying that the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is an institution; since 1958, it has been a bastion of African American excellence in artistic expression. AAADT has showcased the works of countless titans of dance, including choreographic legends like Talley Beatty and Katherine Dunham. Its rich history is well-deserved, and for young dancers, the chance to be a part of that history is almost unfathomable. But it becomes the reality of a select few who don't take the opportunity lightly.

"I really can't put into words what it means to be a part of the Ailey company," explains dancer Daniel Harder. "I just know that there's an immense joy that I feel coming to work every day. And regardless of the days that my back may hurt and my neck won't move or we're on tour and it's week 16 and I'm looking at the same faces; I know that we're all in it together and I just feel a large amount of joy and excitement in coming to work every day. It really is incredible. It's a blessing in being able to do what you love to do and share it with people all over. I think we all take joy in that."

Ghrai Devore welcomes the opportunity to represent Alvin Ailey while also possibly inspiring someone else to aspire to reach where she has and beyond.

"There's such a rich history here. It's my mother, my grandmother — everybody that I've ever known knows about the Ailey company," she says. "And to be even a small part of that is really important for the people that come behind me because they're going to see the work that I'm doing now and maybe be inspired and it might make them want to pursue dance or at least strive for something, and I think that's really important."

But for others, the anxiety involved with climbing the ladder and becoming a professional dancer with one of the most celebrated companies in the world was a bit daunting at first.

"I didn't take dance that serious [for a while] because I wasn't sure if I wanted to be a dancer," shares Jeroboam Bozeman. "I was a little discouraged, so I wasn't really focused on dancing. But I'm so grateful that I had an opportunity to stick with it and people continued to push me." In being pushed, Bozeman found his inspiration and his focus. "There is a high level of discipline that comes with dancing and also there's a level of maturity that you get from dancing.

Bozeman took a somewhat unconventional road to the Alvin Ailey company. The Brooklyn, New York-born dancer was once a child with special challenges, who found his voice through dance.

"I'd always been attracted to movement and dance growing up," he recalls. "I was a child that was mute, who didn't really speak much; and my form of communication was American Sign Language. I was introduced to dance and dance helped me express myself freely. I remember when I attended my junior high school, there were posters of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater all over the studio and I'd think 'Oh, I wanna be there, I wanna dance there.' Back then, when I was younger, a young boy from Brooklyn trying to be a dancer for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, I just felt it wasn't attainable. It was a dream. Now that I have the opportunity to be here, it's such an honor."

Bozeman finds his greatest joy in being able to collaborate with like-minded talents who constantly push him and themselves.

"Every day I wake up and I'm so grateful that I get to be a part of an organization that has impacted the world, but also to be able to work with such incredible artists. Their work ethic, their consistency, their dedication and their love is always so motivating and so inspiring. So being here, I'm always fulfilled. Even when I'm aching or when there's pain. It comes with it — dance isn't easy, but that is what motivates me and gets me up in the morning. I get to share what I love to do and I get to give back. That's always been something that's been very important to me. Now that I'm in a position where I'm somewhat being watched as some kind of figure, I want to motivate and inspire young dancers and young people. I think we are in a generation where we are misled by

society and how media portrays us and I want to be a vessel and an example to show that there are dreams and there are things that you want to obtain that are possible.

“Even if you’re from Brooklyn,” he adds with a laugh.

Wisconsin may not be the first place one thinks of when the subject of dance is brought up, but Fana Tasfagiorgis took her first steps toward her dreams back home in Madison — eventually working her way to New York City and joining Ailey in 2013. The rigors of the season are not for the faint of heart, this is physically demanding stuff. But for Tasfagiorgis, it’s as important that she hones her spirit as much as her body for a performance.

“We spend so much time in the studio working physically, but I like to prepare spiritually and mentally what I’m going to be thinking for each piece and each moment in the performing season,” she explains. “... Our goal is to share something with the audience. No matter what we’re doing. So I just take the time to reflect on what each piece means to me and to all of us. Moments like that help me prepare for the season, mentally.”

And as far as performing itself, it is both grueling and cathartic for the dancers. A study in the healing power of expression and the rewards of disciplined hard work, the performances mean so much for those committed to upholding the proud legacy of Alvin Ailey. And the dancers are committed to connecting with their audience.

“I think it’s very important to be as authentically you as possible,” says Devore. “We do perform so much — we’re always giving, giving, giving. And when you don’t really know yourself, it’s kind of hard to allow the audience to be inside of the space with you.”

Devore admits that it can be slightly nerve-racking to perform in the home of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater — New York City. “Inevitably, there’s always going to be at least one person that you know in the audience!” she says with a grin. “So it’s kind of like ‘well, I’ve done the work to get here, so this is what I have to share. It may not be what you thought you were going to see, but this is what I have to give today.’ ”

“New York city is the Ailey company’s home, so the audience is similar to family,” Harder echoes. “So it’s that pressure of being in front of family because you not only want to share and be authentic, but you also want to impress them and do well. There’s that added pressure, but there’s also a sense of ease and comfort as well, because again, you’re in front of family.”

That feeling of family is a part of the legacy the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. And each dancer on that stage fought hard to realize their dream of becoming a part of that family. And they all have the same ambition: To continue expressing themselves and being ambassadors for their art, while also striving to attain new heights and realize new dreams.

“So many people inspired me to be here, it’s a dream come true,” shares Tasfagiorgis — before pausing. “But at the same time — I have a lot of people ask me ‘What does it feel like to have your dream come true?’ There are so many new dreams to reach, just pertaining to making the world better. There are so many things to add to that. I am inspired by [my fellow dancers] all the time. We are the kind of company that does everything — even if it’s not our strength, we’ll work on it and turn it into a strength. And that’s so beautiful and inspiring to me [to see] how that transformation takes place. It’s an honor to be a part of reaching someone in the audience each day. Whether you’re in the mood to or not, it comes with the job. You’re always sharing, always giving and always seeking more.”

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Images by Angela Vasquez for Steed Media Service

