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Alvin Ailey dancers teach technique and confidence to South African dancers

By Lynsey Chutel



Beginner dancers take part in a master class in Johannesburg's historic Soweto township on Wednesday Sept 2, 2015, given by instructor Vernard J. Gilmore, front, from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater a day before they begin the South African leg of their international tour. The dance company last visited South Africa 17-years ago, soon after the end of apartheid, and several South Africans have won scholarships to the Ailey school in the United States. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — A day before the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater begin the South African leg of their international tour, the company's dancers taught a master class in Johannesburg's historic Soweto township on Wednesday.

The dance company last visited South Africa 17 years ago, soon after the end of apartheid. Several South Africans have won scholarships to the Ailey school in the United States, and young dancers hope they will be noticed too.

Ailey dancer Glenn Sims emphasizes the importance of strength as he leads a class of adults. Some frown as they count each move while others laugh off missteps, then quickly rejoin the line. Their arms reach further as their confidence grows. The modest room has no mirrors so the dancers watch their reflections in windows. At the end of the lesson, they quiz Sims about life as a professional dancer.

The story of Alvin Ailey, an African-American who launched a now globally recognized dance company more than 50 years ago, resonates in South Africa where black dancers are beginning to make their mark.

"To have them come is reaffirming," said Mahlatse Kgoale, a wiry 28-year-old with striking hazel eyes, who believed all professional dancers were Russian before he discovered Ailey.

"What does the music make you feel?" company dancer Vernard Gilmore asks a beginner class across the hall. The teenagers exchange nervous looks at the start of the high-energy class. By the end, they shriek with laughter as Gilmore shows off the local moves he's learned.

Bran-Leigh Challens, 14, and her high school group drove more than two hours from a mining town in North West province to join the class.

"It has given me the opportunity to know dance is my future," she said, adding that Ailey is one of her dance heroes.

