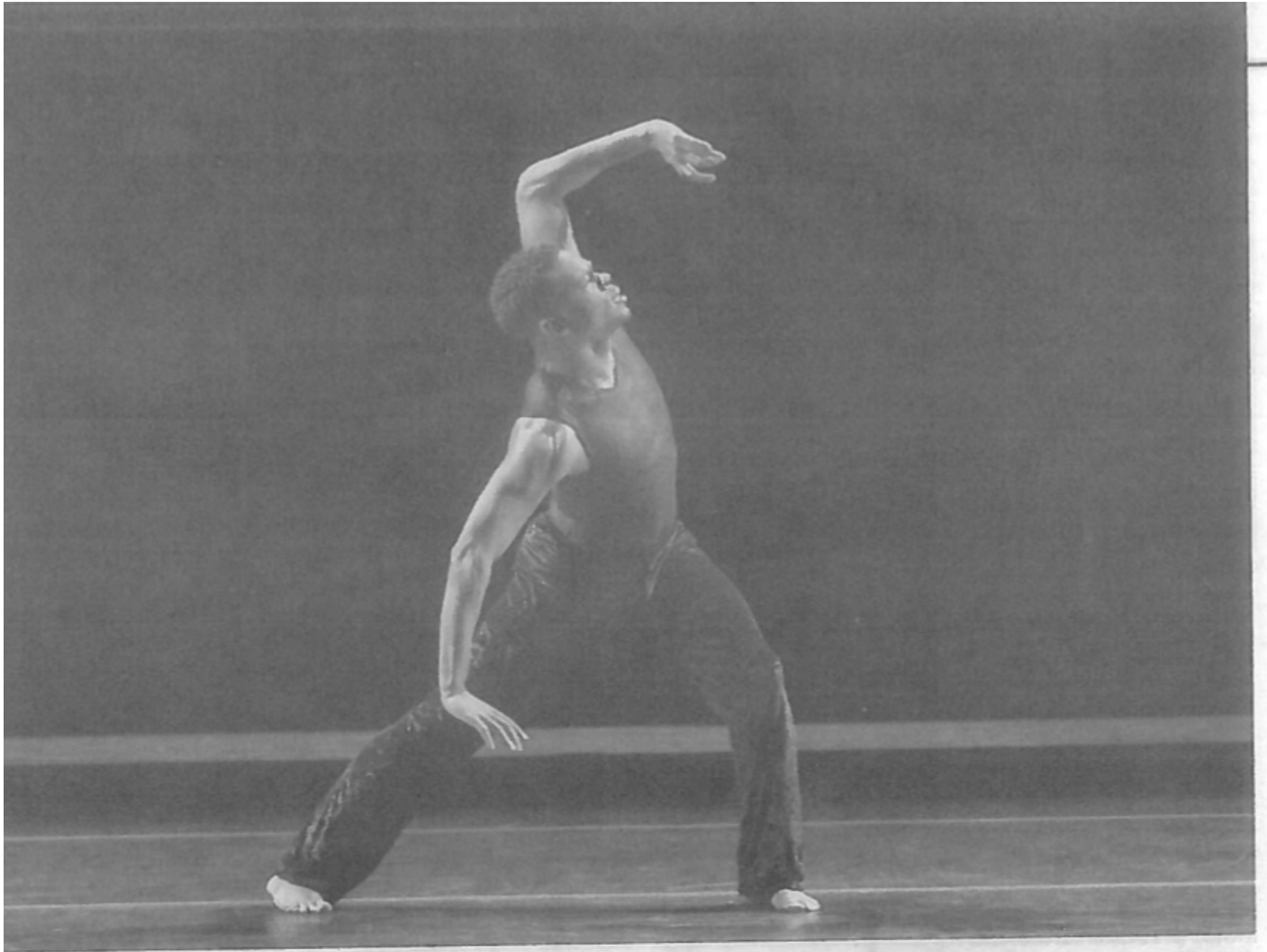


SOUTH SIDE WEEKLY

March 9, 2017



A Dancer's Homecoming

South Sider Solomon Dumas returns to Chicago with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

BY LAUREN PANKIN

Solomon Dumas is nervous about dancing in Chicago.

As a new member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, based in New York City, the twenty-eight-year-old Dumas did not get stage fright on a recent European tour, where he performed in Denmark and Switzerland, nor in the other cities where he performed on a nationwide domestic tour that has brought him, finally, back to his roots.

But as a South Sider making his first homecoming performance on March 22,

there is much more at stake. This time, Dumas has to fill the shoes of the dancers who inspired him to pursue his artistic passions fifteen years ago.

Founded in 1958 by dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey, the Ailey Theater performs modern works focuses on the beauty of Black heritage, Dumas said. Fifty years later, in 2008, a U.S. Congressional resolution designated the Ailey ensemble an American cultural ambassador to the world.

Famed for his 1960 work, *Revelations*,

Ailey choreographed dozens of dances for his company, combining the fundamentals of blues, spirituals, and gospel with elements of "codified" techniques such as ballet and jazz. As of this year, the Ailey company has performed for about twenty-five million people at theaters in seventy-one countries, according to the ensemble's official website.

Ailey, raised among sharecroppers from rural Texas, believed in the healing power of exposing people to different cultures through the arts—even at a time

when segregation was rampant in the South, Dumas said.

"Mr. Ailey comes from a period that when [the dance ensemble] traveled across the country, it was dangerous," Dumas said. "If you went to a certain place, you wouldn't be able to walk through the front door or use the same bathrooms [as whites]."

Ailey's last mission was to create a camp for inner city and underserved children who would not otherwise have an opportunity to take dance classes,

Dumas said. This dream materialized as AileyCamp, which has a chapter in Chicago. At the age of twelve, Dumas was introduced to dance through Chicago's summer AileyCamp. He has now become the first AileyCamp student to perform in the main Alvin Ailey ensemble.

Encouraged and supported by his single mother to pursue dance, Dumas said he "busted his behind" seven days a week to realize his dreams.

"I was very inspired by Mr. Ailey's story," Dumas said. "He was raised by a single mother. I wasn't born in the South [like him], but I have roots in the South."

After spending his days learning about the rich Black experience before slavery at the Betty Shabazz International Charter School, Dumas would head to the dance studio to perfect his ballet, modern, and jazz dance techniques. He trained at the Chicago Academy for the Arts and the Russell Talbert Dance Studio in Bronzeville until moving to New York, where he studied at the Ailey School and joining the Ailey II ensemble. He eventually became a member of the Evidence dance company, directed by Ronald K. Brown, in Brooklyn.

Between 2010 and 2016, Dumas auditioned for the main Alvin Ailey dance company multiple times. He was working five jobs when he finally was accepted in the spring of 2016.

"I experienced what it was like to be a starving, hustling artist," Dumas said, "but I'm from Chicago, so I know how to hustle. I saw people in the South Side selling shea butter, incense, CDs—people working hard to make ends meet with three or four jobs."

Though Dumas loves the South Side and its strong sense of community, he said he wanted to journey outside of the city, despite the uncertainty of his future in dance.

"I didn't know we had dance as an outlet," Dumas said. "Dance can take you around the world, and I looked at the dancers who had a sophistication about them. I knew that I love where I come from and the South Side, where I was born and raised, but I knew that I wanted to see the world."

While in New York, Dumas worked as an independent contractor for the Department of Education. He said his work with inner city children inspired him to continue following his own aspirations.

"I remember teaching my kids that they had to shoot for their dreams and not give up," Dumas said. "As I am telling them to work hard and shoot for their

dreams, I have to do the same thing."

Dumas said he sees an element of his own inner city childhood experience in his favorite work of the tour, *Untitled America*. Through Kyle Abraham's choreography and interpolated sound bites of interviews, the work loosely explores the impact of mass incarceration on the family.

"It's a piece that's personal," Dumas said. Growing up on the South Side, Dumas said he knew friends and neighbors with incarcerated relatives, and he saw how that affected the family structure when so many fathers, uncles, and brothers were absent.

"We've all been able to experience some sort of emotion that's attached to longing for a family member, longing for a lost family member, longing for someone you can't communicate with," Dumas said. "I think it's something that everyone will be able to relate to, but if people haven't experienced that, it will give them a little bit of information on how this affects African-American families, especially with all of the media attention the South Side has been getting in the past four years." Dumas said the South Side depicted in the media (and by the president) as a "war zone" isn't the vibrant community he remembers.

Former AileyCamp Chicago director Lisa Johnson-Willingham has known Dumas ever since he attended camp and took a class with her. She said that even as a teenager, Dumas had an older spirit and was attuned to what he had to say through dance.

"When you watch him [Dumas] move, he just has that special 'it' thing about his movement style," Johnson-Willingham said. "I've watched him develop that. He speaks to the audience with his authentic self, as he became more comfortable with who he is, and as a black man from Chicago."

Johnson-Willingham attributed her former student's success not only to his determination, but to the "spirituality" of the South Side and the artists who influenced, trained, and supported him.

"My expectation hasn't changed for Solomon," she said. "I think it will be an extraordinary homecoming for him, for him to give his community a gratitude performance."

Dumas said he hopes that his success as a dancer will show that black men can thrive and be role models as artists and not just as athletes, even though he acknowledges that dance combines the two disciplines.

"I would hope that young men from the South Side can be inspired," Dumas said about his Chicago performance. "I would hope that parents can encourage their children to become artists." *

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Auditorium Theatre of Roosevelt University 50 E. Congress Pkwy. March 22–March 26 Wednesday–Friday, 7:30pm; Saturday, 2pm and 8pm; Sunday, 3pm. Starting at \$33. (312) 341-2300. auditoriumtheatre.org

GALLERY REVIEW

Hyde Park Art Center

BY JAKE BITTLE

Community-oriented galleries like those in the Hyde Park Art Center (HPAC) are founded on the idea that encounters with art can be educational. Now, with a new exhibition called "Public School," the gallery is exploring the possibility that education itself—meaning pencil sharpeners, cubbies, and swing sets—might be an object of artistic interest.

Artists Jim Duignan and Rachel L. S. Harper, respectively of Chicago-based arts education organizations Stockyard Institute and Seen + Heard, have collaborated to transform HPAC's central gallery into an environment that is half learning center, half sculpture garden. Dominating the room is a decommissioned school bus with the words "UTOPIAN CENTER FOR CIVIC LOVE" printed on its side; the seats have been pulled out and arranged in rows on the floor while the bus interior has been repurposed as a "theater." A podium made of found wood and painted with "MR. DUIGNAN" stands atop a large wood dais surrounded by small chairs. In the corner of the room, a cage full of functional radio broadcasting equipment (to be used in on-site workshops) stands beneath two swings that hang from the high ceiling.

The exhibition's resistance to being seen as simply a collection of things to look at is intentional: "Public School" will host months of workshops, screenings, and conversations. The gallery brochure says the space intends to "[highlight]

the technical learning resources nestled in [the city's] neighborhoods." At publication time, one of the gallery's walls was already covered with screen-printed posters, made at a Sanctuary Poster Screen Printing workshop on February 26, declaring the importance of sanctuaries for immigrants and refugees. In the foyer outside the gallery, the Humboldt Park-based Read/Write Library has set up a community library filled with books, local publications, and other items of interest.

By filling the space again and again with learning and work, "Public School" redefines not just what a gallery can be, but what a school can be. Throughout the months of March and April, HPAC will be hosting the Chicago Home Theater Festival, in which activists and organizers will create "field guides" for their neighborhoods, as well as a series of podcasting workshops. On March 12, Duignan, Harper, and a series of collaborators will host a daylong series of workshops "for people ages 0 and up." The events and programs will continue through June 25, which should be shortly after the end of the CPS school year, unless the state's endless budget woes make summer break come early.

"Public School," Hyde Park Art Center, 5020 S. Cornell Ave. Through June 25. Monday–Thursday, 9am–8pm; Friday–Saturday, 9am–5pm; Sunday, noon–5pm. See website for workshop information. Free. (773) 324-5520. hydeparkart.org