

N'DIGO

Chicagoan Solomon Dumas

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How did a young man, like you, from the South Side of Chicago become interested in dance?

My mother was the one who insisted that I go to AileyCamp. I did a lot of community theater in the South Side of Chicago (I was interested in being an actor), and my mom thought it would be a good idea for me to know how to dance. She had seen Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater perform, and heard they were hosting a summer program for inner city children. She forced me to go, so that's how I was introduced to dance.

Where did you go to school?

I attended Betty Shabazz International Charter School, which is a predominantly African American school that specialized in African centered education. It stressed the importance of black history, and all subjects were taught from an Afro-centric perspective. I think that's what helped Alvin Ailey make sense to me – Mr. Ailey was a black man and his choreography was rooted in his experiences. He started the company at the brink of the Civil Rights Movement, and at the time there was a lot of activism going on.

What did you learn from the AileyCamp?

I learned discipline through dance, but AileyCamp is so much more than a dance camp, it's a personal development camp. We started and ended the day with affirmations, and I didn't know it at the time, but the power of affirmations really does affect you on a cellular level. It does something to your spirit, affecting you spiritually, emotionally, and mentally. We started the day saying empowering affirmations like:



I will think before I act.
I will listen to learn.
I will greet each day with love in my heart.
I am a winner.
I am in control of my mind, body, and spirit.

These statements are empowering, and they taught us self-determination. Being in AileyCamp was a powerful experience for me.

You are the first student in AileyCamp to perform in the main ensemble, tell me about that transition?

It's hard to articulate into words, but the transition was one of the most important moments of my life. I was a member of Ailey II from 2010-2012, and after Ailey II, I didn't get into the first company after auditioning twice, but I had an opportunity to perform with Ronald K. Brown and I did a lot of freelance work. Majority of the work that I did involved community outreach in New York's inner city – I worked in Brooklyn at the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation and in Harlem at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture where I created a dance/dance history curriculum for The Young Scholars Program.

It was amazing for me to see everything come full circle after I joined the first company in May 2016 and performed at Lincoln Center one month later in June. I didn't invite anyone to the performance because it was my first performance with the company, I was so nervous, and I hadn't danced with an organization for four years. I was cast in the "Sinner Man" section of Alvin Ailey's Revelations, and I remember when I ran on to the stage I heard people in the audience screaming my name and in my head, I'm thinking, "Who is that? I didn't invite anyone here!" – it happened to be the students that I taught. That was a full circle moment where I knew this was supposed to happen. I realized being a part of the company was so much bigger than me. Starting off as an AileyCamper and going into the first company has been a dream come true. I started my formal dance training when I was 14 years old, and my experience shows dance students that anything is possible. Mr. Ailey's legacy was about bringing dance back to the people, and I'm a direct example of the effect that dance can have on someone's life.

What do you get out of dance?

When I was first exposed to dance as a young man, dance taught me manners, discipline, how to respect women, how to carry myself, confidence, organization, preparation, hygiene, and it taught me indirectly about health – not just what to eat, but the ways to take care of your body. Dance has made me become a better citizen of the world. I love what I do, and I love how I feel when I dance.

What's your favorite dance?

Besides Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*, there's another piece of his entitled *Cry*. I don't perform it though – it's a female solo that he choreographed as a birthday present to his mother and he dedicated it to black women everywhere, especially our mothers. Every time I see the piece, it resonates with me because there are specific images that I'm able to identify with my mom, aunts, and grandmother. There's a moment when the female soloist portrays a queen and another part where she portrays a servant. It reminds me of my grandmother who was a maid in the South before moving to Chicago and then she worked as a waitress and in factories. There are so many images in *Cry* that Mr. Ailey was able to capture. It touches me so much, I can feel the spirit of these characters. I've even sat in the wings before and cried watching the piece. Like *Revelations*, I never get tired of watching it – there's always something new to discover.



What's on your playlist?

Right now, I'm listening to SZA, Meshell Ndegeocello, Prince, and *Black Panther: The Album – Music From and Inspired By*. I also listen to a lot of gospel music – something about it soothes me and reminds me of my grandmother.

You've lived in Chicago and New York, what's the difference between the two cities?

First let me say this: I wouldn't trade my experience of growing up in Chicago for anything! Chicago – the South Side in particular – was a special place growing up. I know in the media there's so much negative attention on the South Side, but there's humanity, community, support, and encouragement. The rearing and education that I received I wouldn't trade it for the world. We were taught to return to our community to share our knowledge and gifts with future generations. The Chicago community is similar in New York. I've done community work in Brooklyn, and I feel that they have a lot of pride and awareness in their community. Much like Chicago, there are a lot of festivals that celebrate black empowerment. The only difference is the cultures – Chicago has more southern retentions and New York is diverse, running the gambit for black diversity with all types of people from the diaspora moving to the city.

You worked five jobs at one time, what were those jobs?

I worked as an assistant manager at Barry's Bootcamp, started a curriculum at Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, independently contracted for the New York City Department of Education, taught artist in residencies at different schools in New York City such as The Frank Sinatra School of the Arts, and taught dance at several places like Ailey Extension, The Ailey School's Junior Division, Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, and Dance Cavise Studios, among others.



You have said you are nervous about dancing in Chicago, although, you have performed in Europe, why are you nervous about dancing in your own hometown?

Last year I was nervous about dancing in Chicago because I hadn't been home in five years. Before joining Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, I kept myself busy teaching at different high schools across the country and dancing with several companies, but coincidentally we never toured to Chicago. I was nervous about performing last year because it had been so long since I saw the people I went to school with or knew from my community. But it's great to be home and I'm looking forward to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's performances at The Auditorium Theatre, March 7-11.