

Alvin Ailey dancers continue outreach at local schools

By: Lillian Brown

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Three dancers from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company came to Boston this week to teach at local schools ahead of their North American tour, which arrives in Boston in May. The schools were the Boston Arts Academy, the Richard J. Murphy School, in Dorchester, the Kennedy Day School, in Brighton, and the Boston Renaissance School, in Hyde Park.

Through the support of the Celebrity Series of Boston, Chalvar Monteiro, Samantha Figgins, and Solomon Dumas traveled to the schools to teach students of various ages and skill sets. The education included Ailey-style dance, as well as history of the late Alvin Ailey, who made it his mission to bring dance to everyone and make it accessible to the underprivileged.

For Monteiro, 30, and Dumas, 30, this was a return trip, since they both participated in Ailey's outreach in Boston last year.

"Honestly, last year I wasn't expecting so much excitement from every school we went to," said Monteiro, who also led this year's classes. "It was nice to just talk about what it is that we do and the vision of our founder for the first time out loud. And it really cemented for me the purpose, my purpose, for being here."

During the lessons Monteiro said that he makes a point to keep retelling Ailey's story and describing the legacy he cultivated.

"He created a job and a space for all three of us to exist as young black professionals," Monteiro said.

"It was really nice to be able to, even in the smallest capacity, show them what it is that we do and what excited us when we were younger," Monteiro said, adding, "seeing dancers who look like us on stage, just being generous and present."

Figgins, 29, also stressed the importance of seeing career dancers that she could relate to while growing up.

"I got to see my sister train in the same places that I did, and take all of that information into the world," Figgins said. "There's more than D.C., there's more than Boston, and so it just gives you the opportunity. . . . I have this vehicle of dance that can take me anywhere."

"So I think that it's important, because a lot of people don't have access to professionals to be able to talk to who are in the field right now who they can see themselves in," Figgins said.

Dumas's role models growing up came directly from Ailey, since he began training at AileyCamp, the Alvin Ailey youth-oriented program. He's the only dancer to



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SOLOMON DUMAS,
the only dancer in the company's top ranks who got his start at the troupe's youth-oriented AileyCamp

Jaena Dellorusso (front) participates at Boston Arts Academy in a master class led by three dancers with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

begin at AileyCamp and advance to the top ranks of the Ailey company.

"It's a cathartic experience for me, because I am a product of outreach," Dumas said, regarding the classes.

"I remember, it informed my future in a way that it gave me permission to know that personally I can: This is something that I can do. I hadn't been exposed to any men that looked like me as artists in the community that I was raised in. . . . It's a privilege to be an artist," Dumas said. "If anything, it makes you a better citizen, because you have a better appreciation for people and the human experience."

It's Dumas's hope that participating in outreach programs could foster a similar inspiration for the next generation of dancers.

Each class was different, but the first was a Thursday morning master class with the Boston Arts Academy at its temporary location in Dorchester.

Over 30 high school students participated, engaging in a variety of activities, from stretching to core-strengthening, before heading into floor exercises and cross-room series. The entire session was set to popular music, curated by Monteiro, including Basement Jaxx's "Samba Magic" and Donald Byrd's "Flight Time."

"When we have experiences like this and the students have experiences like this, it puts things in perspective for how far they can actually go with their art," said William McLaughlin, the BAA's dance department chair. "And it also inspires them to just achieve and push and step outside of their comfort zone."

The students technically had the day off, but as soon as McLaughlin told them that Ailey dancers were returning, they volunteered to come in, most showing up over an hour early Thursday morning.

"I was excited leading up to it," said BAA junior Kaydra Hopkins, who also participated last year. "I'll always take the chance to dance with Ailey."

Chris Smith Jr., a BAA freshman who has been dancing for five years, said that the experience was "nerve-wracking but fun."

"It actually meant a lot emotionally and physically," he said after the session. "Ailey is a place where I can see myself in the future."

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