

The New York Times

Ailey's New Secret Weapon: The Heroically Unmannered James Gilmer

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December 13, 2021

NEWS | CRITICISM

MONDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2021

Arts
The New York Times



Bringing His Own Drama Onstage

Alvin Ailey's new secret weapon is the heroically unmannered James Gilmer.

By GIA KOURLAS

December is never a breeze for an Alvin Ailey dancer, but recently — amid rehearsals and with a performance looming that evening — James Gilmer found himself in an empty closet on the studio side of New York City Center. Armed with a late lunch, he was using his only break of the day for an interview. But as he sees it, it's better not to waste time.

Omicron is not just looming. It's here. Even Gilmer's plans to attend a dance performance just after Thanksgiving were thwarted: Complexions canceled the second half of its season at the Joyce Theater after breakthrough cases of Covid-19 were detected among the dancers. So when it comes to his position at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Gilmer has perspective.

"I'm continuing to be very cautious, and I'm not letting any day pass without remembering that it's such a gift," he said. "As much as it's an opportunity and a privilege to perform onstage already, it's even more so now."

Gilmer, 28, a member of Ailey since June 2019, has reason to feel both grateful and a little hesitant. After he joined the company — it took him two auditions — he moved to Harlem from San Francisco, where he had been performing with ODC/Dance and Amy Seiwert's Imagery. He settled into "Revelations" after learning the Ailey masterwork from the veteran dancer and associate artistic director, Matthew Rushing. ("An incredibly dear experience," Gilmer

James Gilmer, at the Ailey studios on West 55th Street, is "really nimble in all senses of the word," a colleague says.

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said.) He went on an international tour with the company, and finished his first season at City Center. But then the pandemic hit.

What was it like to finally get the job and then have to go into lockdown? Gilmer still might have been getting his bearings, but it was clear from the start that he was a stand-out.

Stuck at home, unable to perform, he did a lot of yoga, which he had become devoted to while living in California. "To feel like my body was my own," he said, "I really needed to center using that practice."

But Gilmer's first serious dance language was ballet. Somewhat unusually for an Ailey dancer, he had an impressive career before he arrived at the company. Classically trained from an early age — he studied in his hometown, at Pittsburgh Ballet Theater School — Gilmer spent six seasons with Cincinnati Ballet, where he attained the rank of soloist.

A strong partner who, at 6 feet 2, fills the stage with a special kind of grandeur, Gilmer is almost heroically unmannered — his dancing has an ease, a looseness that can be rare in ballet dancers. Robert Battle, Ailey's artistic director, recalled being struck by his size and agility, along with his versatility.

"I remember asking a friend of mine in California, 'What's he like?' And it was, 'Oh, he's no drama, he's easygoing, but really gifted.'"

Battle admires Gilmer's noble bearing and what he called "a genuine heart."

"He's really nimble in all senses of the word," he added, "which is usually just meaning flexible. But I mean something a little more soulful: He's not a peacock, you know? He's very much about the work and about giving himself over to the work in such a wonderful and beautiful way."

Gilmer *could* be a peacock: With his elegant carriage and line, and his scrupulous technique, he could veer toward a more aloof place as a performer — or be a show-off. "He has a wonderful economy with how he shows his colors — his feathers if you will," Battle said. "He's able to meet the



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challenges of the different choreographers that come in because he's so open."

Battle was struck when coaching him in Azure Barton's "Busk" with how Gilmer listened. "His whole body is an ear," Battle said. "You get an immediate response to what it is you're asking him to do. And that may seem simple, but believe me, it isn't."

Gilmer first saw the Ailey company perform when he was around 9 or 10. He was always a fan. "Even when I started focusing on ballet, there was a part of me that always wanted Ailey and always kind of dreamed of Ailey," he said.

For Gilmer, being an Ailey dancer has to do with being able to convey a story, something he said he has wanted to do onstage his whole life. Finding the drama — and his own personal drama — within a classic Ai-

James Gilmer loosening up in a dance studio at Alvin Ailey. He said that his parents signed him up for dance classes because he was always moving. Now, he sees his role as an Ailey dancer who is able to convey a story.

ley role is not the same thing as being a prince in ballet.

While in Cincinnati, Gilmer performed in works by George Balanchine and contemporary choreographers, as well as dancing leading classical parts in "Cinderella," "The Nutcracker" and "Romeo and Juliet." (He played Tybalt. "Dying onstage," he said, flashing a quick grin. "So fun.")

When he left to dance in California, he hadn't planned on abandoning ballet entirely. But he wanted to transition out of a company that was so focused on full-length story ballets. "With their usual narratives and characterizations, although fun to perform," he said, "I was left feeling unseen and somewhat unexpressed as a person and artist."

Gilmer wanted more than "tights-and-a-

tunic kind of roles," he said. "I could also feel myself being pulled to find a place where there were more bodies like mine, not just Black but long limbed, athletic, versatile dancer bodies."

He loved working for Victoria Morgan, Cincinnati Ballet's artistic director, calling her "a very visionary type of a boss." He loves working with women in general, he said, including Twyla Tharp, who cast him in the premiere of "Second Duet" opposite Jacquelin Harris, also of Ailey, for her "Twyla Now" program at City Center. During the working process — it was extensive — Tharp told him to train like a boxer.

What did that mean? "Footwork," he said. "Having a sense of lightness on the floor. It's being able to move in any direction and how that correlates to your core and where

things are releasing and also inhabiting your body onstage. Being able to just be in your bones and muscles. And that's the performance."

Is that why his feet were especially lithe and lively in "Lazarus," a hip-hop work by Rennie Harris, this season? He was so grounded, so relaxed despite, at times, the choreography's breakneck speed. Yet Gilmer's performance, particularly in the dance's more dramatic moments, wasn't exterior, but interior: private, resolute, haunting.

That may have had something to do with Tharp, too, who coached him in both his dancing and his acting. "To learn from someone of that caliber after so much time away from dance was really satisfying that huge void and that urgency to create and to get moving again," Gilmer said. "I've been able to really take that and run with it with everything. There are obviously certain ways of training, but there's so much that she made me realize that I can take into any dancing space and really transform the way that I perform."

He laughed. "She's so cool," he said. "I hope that that wasn't it." (It likely won't be; at the very least, Battle plans on bringing "Second Duet" into the Ailey repertoire.)

In thinking about why dance became such an important part of his life — Gilmer said his parents signed him up for classes because he was always moving — he considers his upper-middle-class upbringing and how much privilege goes into becoming a professional dancer. "When you have two parents as a Black person, and you're able to grow up in a Victorian-style home with your own bedroom and a living room and a second floor and a third floor and having the availability to move around," he said. "Like physically move my body through space and run up and down stairs. And the yard: having a front yard, having a backyard."

He grew up, essentially, in a world of space, and that gave him a restless spirit: "I feel it generating within me," he said. "It always drew me back to the studio."

As a dancer, Gilmer wants to share it, to be, like the women he's worked with, as generous as possible. "It also almost elevates the responsibility because I've been given so incredibly much," he said. "So to give it back to the audience in that way is really all I ever intend to do."