

MONTCLAIR *Local*

NJPAC performance is like a “homecoming” for an MHS grad

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A pirouette isn't the only full circle happening in Chalvar Monteiro's life.

When the Montclair High School graduate was 12 years old, he saw the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater perform at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark. It was a life-changing moment for him.

Now, Monteiro will be the one onstage, performing with the Alvin Ailey troupe at NJPAC when the company completes its 22-stop tour on May 12, 13 and 14. The tour stop will not only include a performance by the company at the cultural center but they will also be holding a performance for schools May 12.

Monteiro always loved to dance. He remembers seeing the Dance Theater of Harlem on Sesame Street and owning a VHS tape of Riverdance, the group that highlights Irish music and dance.

But despite consuming dance in every form possible from a young age, he didn't realize that it would be possible to pursue it professionally until he saw the Alvin Ailey dancers that day in Newark in 2002.

"It wasn't until I saw Ailey in person that I knew that dancing could be something that could sustain a lifestyle," he said. "I modeled my training and the rigor of my training around that super-impactful performance all those years ago."

Monteiro was born and raised in Montclair, graduating early from the high school in 2005. He briefly attended Montclair State University at the age of 16 before transferring.

It was Montclair that would lay the foundation for Monteiro's training, or "daily vitamin," as he would call it. He attended Sharron Miller's Academy for the Performing Arts, where he received formal training in ballet.

When he was in eighth grade at Renaissance Middle School, he remembers taking a drama class that required the students to move their body in different ways.

Though Monteiro was supported by his parents and by mentors like Miller, he recalls how difficult it was breaking into the industry without having the backing of social media, as most performers do today. "In the early 2000s, social media, the internet, was not as developed as it is now, and so as far as visibility and accessibility to certain resources, that just was not a thing," he said. "Working toward my goal required a lot more willpower and required my family to be even more of a support system."

For Monteiro the hardships that came with wanting to pursue dance were relentless. He was bullied growing up and changed schools multiple times as a result. As a Black man wanting to become a dancer, he also battled through such hardships as racism and tokenism. Different dance companies would hire dancers of color to meet a quota rather than see different people represented on the stage, he said.

"I love dance more than I was focused on the naysayers, so it wasn't easy, and it wasn't the most pleasurable thing," he said about the hardships. "But it was also undeniable how I felt taking classes and moving my body and learning the intelligence that my body had to offer through dance."

Becoming a member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was always his goal. That would keep him from dwelling on anything that might limit him in his pursuit, including the idea of his masculinity being challenged as a dancer. Being trained in specialties, like ballet, hip-hop and traditional African dance, allowed Monteiro to have an appreciation for all forms of dance, he said.

"I'm able to transcend any type of body politic that might exist, because I can speak any language that I choose, as a mover," he said. If he focuses on the constraints that people feel he should follow, he thinks he wouldn't be able to be the dancer he is today.

"It can feel limiting, it can feel unnatural at times if you only think about the politics that exist against you," he said. "Instead, I chose to just think about the beauty and what it is that I didn't know, and go after those things to broaden my horizons and sharpen my skills a bit more."

Monteiro auditioned for seven years in a row before he was chosen to join the Alvin Ailey company in 2015. In the midst of those seven years, he considered quitting dance altogether and pursuing writing instead.

But just before that seventh audition — by which time he had 10 years of dancing experience under his belt — some Ailey dancers with whom he'd become friends gave him two pieces of advice. The first was to go in and have fun. The second was that the company was looking for someone who would be a great addition to the dance collective instead of somebody it would have to coach to be a good addition.

"So I went in there, for the seventh audition, just prepared to smile and keep the energy light and have fun and be encouraging," he said. "Even when I wasn't on the dance floor, I was clapping for people on the floor."

Monteiro ended up being hired on the spot and was one of two people added to the company that year.

Now, seven years later, he gets to bring back the lessons learned throughout those years to the place where it all originated for him. He believes that performing at NJPAC is "poetic" and feels like a homecoming.

"Not only am I returning to the place where it all started for me, but it's also the last stop on the tour, which also signals the end of a season," Monteiro said. "So it always feels like a beautiful bow on a really big gift."

To see the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at NJPAC, visit njpac.org.

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