



Hometown heroes return: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Spring concert series

By: Tristan Burns

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The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has been entertaining Chicagoans for generations, and their impact has inspired countless of our dancers; in fact, some even go on to join the ensemble.

Veteran company member, Vernard Gilmore, and recent inductee, Isaiah Day, are both Chicago South Side natives whose talents were fostered by some of the city's most prominent artists and institutions. In an interview with See Chicago Dance, these hometown heroes share what it's like to be a dancer in one of the country's most prestigious dance companies.

Isaiah Day

Isaiah Day, who joined the company in March of 2023, is no stranger to the grind, pursuing a degree in dance from The Juilliard School while performing with the company. "It's a lot of work," says Day. "We get to dance so much. The transition from Juilliard to Ailey has been eye-opening and a very fast adjustment. In school I was always preparing for the stage; now, we're always on stage. It's a big learning curve."



Day was given a two-minute solo when working with choreographer Alonzo King on his work *Following the Subtle Current Upstream* (2000) in his first year with the company.

Day recalls feelings of nervousness while working with such a luminary but also the exhilaration of learning from a spiritual dance guru. "[King is] a wealth of knowledge. Dare I say, a little intimidating, because of how vast his artistic, spiritual and physical knowledge is. Being so young, I wasn't prepared for everything he had to offer, but the more I get to do his work the more I get to understand him. Working with him made me recognize my own potential as an artist, and he made me realize how big artistically and spiritually I am."

You can catch Isaiah Day in every evening of Ailey's upcoming five-night run in Chicago.



Vernard Gilmore

Vernard Gilmore has had plenty of time to acclimate to the intense regiment required of AAADT. Although he joined the company in 1997, Gilmore is still cognizant of the level of versatility it takes to perform the works of different artists. "Being in a repertory company, you work with two or three choreographers a year. Getting choreographers in and trying to learn their style... that's one thing I love about Ailey being a repertory company, you must be prepared for different styles at any given moment."

Gilmore shared what a day in the life of an AAADT dancer looks like, consisting of dance class from 10:30am-12pm, rehearsal from 12-3pm (one hour for lunch) and more rehearsal from 4-7pm. But that's what it takes to master the style of Alvin Ailey, which Gilmore describes as "ballet bottom, modern top."

Adding to that, when a new choreographer is invited to work with the company, they get 3-4 weeks and 3-4 hours per day, which is not a lot of time to learn a new, long-form work in an unfamiliar style. Hip hop, ballet, modern, African... AAADT dancers must be able to glide and slide through all those different techniques and do them at a high level of excellence.

Although the process is arduous, Gilmore thrives in this environment, earning himself choice roles such as the vaunted male solo in Ailey's classic *Revelations* (1960). Gilmore doesn't take his status as a longtime company dancer lightly, and instead strives to embody the spirit of physical and personal evolution. "I get a chance to be out there and shine a light on the ability to be a

veteran and bring a different level of artistry to it. You've had time to soak in it and evolve as a person as well. To get to do those roles is really special."

We call them hometown heroes, and all heroes have an origin story. For Day and Gilmore, that story begins on the South Side of Chicago.

Growing up in the Westlawn/Hyde Park neighborhoods, Isaiah Day got his start in dance in the Yielded Life Dance Ministry of the New Life Covenant Church Southeast. The ministry organized excursions for young dancers to see the Ailey company every year. "I've been loving the company from about the age of seven until high school, and it's always been a dream of mine to be in Ailey."



As an adolescent, he enrolled in the Hubbard Street's Youth Dance Programs, later attending the Chicago Academy of the Arts where he honed his technique under notable artists Randy Duncan, Patrick Simoniello and Deborah Goodman. After attending Barat College in Lake Forest, Day was accepted to The Juilliard School where he is now in his final year.

Day credits his evolution as a dancer in part to a lifetime of encouragement. "Everyone's been supportive. Besides school kids who don't really understand boys dancing, I've never run into anyone trying to block the stream. What was special about starting out dancing in church is that it protected me from that."

Vernard Gilmore grew up in Englewood where he began dancing with neighborhood children. Groups organized by his mother would perform in parades along Halsted St. While attending Curie High School, he found his passion for dance studying under such artists as Emily Stein, Birute Barodicaite, Homer Bryant and Randy Duncan. As a young adult, Gilmore received a full scholarship to attend The Ailey School, which led to a place in the AAADT's second company, Ailey II, before being inducted into the professional company.



Gilmore is also a passionate advocate of body alignment work. He serves as a mentor for the Floor Barre Foundation and is a personal trainer with the National Academy of Sports Medicine. Now a teacher at the Ailey School, he uses his in-depth knowledge of body-health optimization to ensure that all the company dancers train their bodies effectively. "As dancers—as an athlete—you're trying to get your body to work at its most optimal level; and you do that by understanding how to keep it working at its most efficient level."

Gilmore is also a choreographer who has set work on Opus Dance Theatre, Jazz Foundation of America, Fire Island Dance Festival (Dancers Responding to Aids), The Ailey School, and Chicago Academy of the Arts. He was featured with Summerstage 2005, Harlem Arts Festival 2011 and Nimbus Dance Works in 2018, and recently set a premiere work on the NYC-based Joffrey Concert Group's "In My Art" event—to name a few! "I want to bring dance beyond the proscenium," says Gilmore, "and create a more innovative way for audiences to experience the art form. That's the goal."

Both Day and Gilmore are excited to return to Chicago for this next round of AAADT performances, and both consider the three different programs to contain some of the company's strongest works. Performances feature classic repertory by Alvin Ailey, audience favorites—Ronald K. Brown's *Dancing Spirit* and Kyle Abraham's *Are You In Your Feelings?*—and new works— *Me, Myself, and You* by Elizabeth Roxas-Dobrich (Midwest Premiere), *Solo* by Hans van Manen, *Following The Subtle Current Upstream* by Alonzo King, and *CENTURY* by Amy Hall Garner.

With so many choreographers on the bill, Chicago audiences will experience many different "voices" with one common goal, to present different perspectives that will challenge our view on life. "I want people to come into the theater and be changed," says Gilmore. "Dance ... defies barriers, defies social constructs and speaks to our spirit."

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater presents three programs from April 17-21 at Auditorium Theater, 50 E. Ida B. Wells Dr. "Program A: Audience Favorites" is April 17 & 20 at 7:30pm; "Program B: All New" is April 19 at 7:30pm and April 20 at 1pm; "Program C: Ailey Classics" is April 18 at 7:30pm and April 21 at 3pm. Tickets are available at auditoriumtheatre.org or by clicking the company link below.