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Dancer From St. Louis Defies Odds

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Antonio Douthit used to be a skinny north St. Louis kid who walked past the opulent Fox Theatre but never went inside — perhaps because it wasn't the thing to do in his neighborhood, perhaps because he thought he couldn't afford it, he said.

But on Friday and Saturday night, the 27-year-old Alvin Ailey dancer, one of 15 men in the renowned 30-member company, was returning to perform on that same stage. And as he recalls those who helped encourage his remarkable, but in many ways improbable, dance career, he has become part of this city's informal network working to educate children about dance and to cultivate promising talent.

"There were so many people out there who helped me," he said, explaining that instructors in St. Louis saw his talent even before he did.

While Douthit lives in New York and frequently travels for performances, he has a mentoring relationship with a St. Louis teen.

In a rehearsal room at Dance St. Louis this week, the 6 foot dancer with long, lean muscles looked every bit the professional, wearing a close-fitting T-shirt and dance shorts. But Douthit's journey to join one of the nation's best-known dance companies wasn't an easy one.

Raised by a single mother, Douthit grew up in neighborhoods where ballet, jazz and modern dance weren't exactly on the table. His friends played football and basketball. He and his brothers never wanted for things, but they weren't well off, he said.

Douthit didn't begin dance classes until he was 15. He and three friends were walking down a street, heard the beat of drums through a window, and thought they would try a class. He now says he thinks they went into the studio to be disruptive, more than anything. The teacher told them they could stay, but only if they paid attention and danced. Only Douthit kept coming back.

That modern-dance teacher spoke to instructors at COCA, now named the Center of Creative Arts, located in a St. Louis suburb. Douthit began classes there both with young children to catch up and with students his own age. Teachers there encouraged him to take ballet in upscale Chesterfield at the Alexandra School of Ballet.

A COCA dance instructor, Lee Nolting, would often give him a ride. Sometimes, he would take the bus or bum rides from other students' mothers to get there.

Eventually, people in St. Louis dance circles encouraged him to apply for scholarships and summer programs to dance in bigger cities and get more training.

Janet Brown, director of operations and education for Dance St. Louis, which brings outside dance companies to the city for performances, said she has not been surprised at all that Douthit has become part of efforts in the city to help its dancers.

"He has always been conscious of who has helped him, and who he can help. As a person, not just a dancer, Antonio is unusual, a very generous person."

Douthit recalled he didn't get much positive reinforcement at home or among his neighborhood friends when he started out. He didn't talk to them about his ballet training.

"I was not going to wear tights. I would wear basketball shorts," he said, but his love for dancing just kept growing. "After a year, you couldn't get me out of tights," he said.

The developments didn't sit particularly well with his mother, who "kind of flipped out" once she heard her son was wearing tights at his dance classes.

She didn't see him dance until his final COCA performance his senior year, when Douthit was told his mother was in the audience crying with pride. After that, the two had a long talk.

"She told me she didn't understand why I wanted to dance but said when she saw my dance, she knew I had to dance," he recalled. His mother passed away in 2004.

Douthit said that when he was 17, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater came to town. The modern dance company with a strong black tradition was founded in 1958 by the late Alvin Ailey. Douthit had watched the ensemble on tape but had never seen a professional dance performance.

He received a free ticket to see the dancers and walked over to the Fox Theatre, alone. Awed by the magic that unfolded in front of him on stage, he made up his mind to become an Alvin Ailey dancer.

"From then on, I knew that was the company I had to dance for," he said.

After high school, he went to North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem for a year and was offered a position at age 19 with the Dance Theatre of Harlem. He stayed there three years and left as a soloist, he said.

In 2004, he auditioned for the Alvin Ailey company and got in, an extraordinary validation of his talent and his hard work, said those who know him. While Douthit has been back in St. Louis before to dance, he expected about 200 people he knew to attend his performances this weekend.

While in town, he made time to see 17-year-old Kelly Marsh IV, a teenager from a St. Louis suburb who shows promise and has a deep love for dance and an almost singular focus. Marsh danced in an Ailey intensive summer program last year in New York.

Earlier this year, Douthit and another Ailey dancer, Kirvin Boyd, "set a piece" for Marsh and other St. Louis-area students to perform.

Douthit offers the young dancer pointers when in town. The two also call or text-message each other perhaps once a week. "I don't think of him like a `mentoree.' He's like a little brother," Douthit said.

Marsh said that as a young dancer, he has to believe in himself, but he called Douthit's work with him and friendship a blessing. "I'm happy to have someone who is watching over me, investing time in me," he said. "It's great to talk to people in the profession you're so ready and willing to be in."