

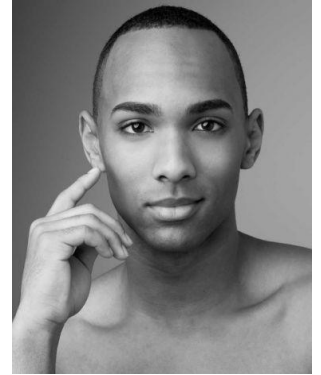
Ozen Grad Dancing With Prestigious NY Company

By Julie Chang
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Even standing, Sean Carmon looks graceful - feet perfectly turned out and hands planted in front of his body. His obvious talent has taken him from the studios of the Bonnie Cokinos School of Dance and the stage at the Julie Rogers Theatre all the way to New York City and Broadway.

Over the past few years, the 23-year-old has danced in two Broadway shows, performing at the Tony Awards and now, dancing for the prestigious Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York City.

As the unbelievable ride goes on, he continues to credit Ozen High School dance instructors Lucia Booth and Eva LeBlanc for administering a "reality check" all those years ago.



"Even though Lucia and I really tried to help him with his dance techniques, we taught the other side of the coin," LeBlanc said. "There's always somebody better than you."

Carmon's mother, Rhoda Jones, remembers him mimicking signature Michael Jackson moves - the high kicks and dizzying spins - when he was as young as 2.

"He always had a natural ability," Jones said.

As a child, Carmon succeeded in gymnastics and progressed to dance after watching his cousin perform at the Cokinos school. He mastered all the dance moves and continued to hone his craft at Ozen while balancing a job and outside training in studios in Orange, Mid-County and Beaumont.

Although he was able to dance for different companies and gain recognition throughout Southeast Texas, he said that his favorite moment while in the area was choreographing a friend's senior year dance.

"I'm watching her in the wings and I started crying," said Carmon. "She was such an inspiration to me. She had everything to me. She had wonderful technique and she was beautiful, and I knew I wanted to be just like her."

After graduating high school, Carmon moved to New York to attend New York University for two years, spending the remainder of his college years at the Ailey School at Fordham University, where he graduated in 2010.

While in college, he was invited to audition for the newly revived Broadway show, "La Cage Aux Folles," based on a 1973 French play that later was transformed into the 1996 Robin Williams film, "The Birdcage." Carmon would later dance in front of millions of viewers - in full drag costume - at the 2010 Tony's where La Cage also won Best Musical Revival.

His mother was among those in the audience for the taping.

"I got to meet Monk," Jones said, referring to actor Tony Shaloub, who was in the Tony's crowd.

But Jones was more excited to see her own star on stage.

"I thank God first, that at his age, that he is able to realize his dreams. Opportunities have opened up for him and he has always had excellent instructors that have taken him under his wings."

After a brief stint in the "Phantom of the Opera" in 2011, Carmon said that the peak of his career thus far has been to dance for the New York City-based Alvin Ailey company.

Carmon said he first learned about the company from Booth and LeBlanc, who incorporated one of its dances, "Revelations," into their curriculum. The dance, like the mission of the Alvin Ailey dance theater, focuses on African-American heritage.

"I can remember when I was in college in the late '80s, the Ailey company came to Houston, and you have a physical response to what you see when they perform," said LeBlanc. "It's not like the modern dance where you're rolling on the ground like an amoeba."

The 30-member modern dance company holds auditions annually - each time drawing at least 200 hopefuls.

"It was one of those things where you know you are exactly at the right place at the right moment, and I don't know if I'll ever have another one," said Carmon about his invitation to join the Ailey company. "It was what Oprah says is an 'ah-ha moment.'"

Since joining the company, Carmon has traveled to Sweden, Germany and Norway with upcoming dates in Paris, Copenhagen and Tel Aviv.

On Sunday, Carmon performed in Houston, among other dances, "Revelations" - the very dance that introduced Carmon to the Ailey Company almost a decade ago.

He has been renewed for another year with the company, and hopes to return to Broadway as well.

And from time to time, he returns to his roots, teaching classes at the Bonnie Cokinos school, Ozen and Lamar.

"Every time he comes home, he teaches class to the kids, and he did that through college," said LeBlanc. "He is very good about giving back."