

Body talk

Alvin Ailey dancer tells tales of HIV-afflicted for Detroit Opera House performance

March 29, 2012
By Andrea Poteet

Since he was a teen, Daniel Harder has loved dance for its ability to communicate emotions that words sometimes can't.

And as the lead in the New York-based Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre's ballet "Home," which comes to the Detroit Opera House March 31 to April 1, he puts his body to work telling the stories of people who have lived with HIV.



The ballet, a partnership with pharmaceutical company Bristol-Myers Squibb, emerged from a contest - called "Fight HIV Your Way" - to highlight the company's HIV medication REYATAZ. To compete, people submitted their stories of life with the disease and the 10 winning stories were morphed into dance steps by hip-hop choreographer Rennie Harris set against uplifting gospel and house music.

"It takes a lot out of you emotionally," says Harder, 24. "It's not something that I can relate to personally, but putting myself in someone else's shoes and going through all those emotions that he or she may go through and trying to convey that to the audience, it's an incredible experience as a performer."

The dance group, founded in 1958 by renowned choreographer Alvin Ailey who died from AIDS in 1989, will also perform "Arden Court" set to a baroque score by William Boyce and Ailey's signature piece "Revelations."

As a gay dancer, Harder said he's excited to have the chance to perform in a ballet with themes so close to the gay community and to dance in a company that prides itself on showcasing performers of various races and orientations.

"It's important for us to continue to enlighten and inform one another," Harder says. "Not just in the gay community, but in the world period. And I think that's the beautiful thing about having the chance to be in a company like Alvin Ailey. Essentially, we are reflections of the audience. So whether you're gay or straight, you can see yourself on the stage and know that someone else shares your truths, your highs and your lows."

In addition to enjoying the physical, fast-paced house-style dance moves, he said he hopes the audience will come away from the performance with more understanding of the disease and its effect on those afflicted with it.

"I think the biggest thing I would want an audience member to walk away with is maybe challenging themselves to open up and to see a different picture or a bigger picture," Harder says. "A lot of times when situations as human beings do not directly affect us, or we only know what we read or what we hear, we develop all these ideas. When you get to have an experience or see a performance, it will hopefully touch you and move you and challenge you to question your thoughts and think outside the box."

For Harder, who began dancing at 15 while attending Maryland's Suitland High School's Center for the Visual and Performing Arts and has danced with Ailey's first company for the past two years, his lead role in the weekend matinee performances of the ballet is the realization of a dream he's had since attending Fordham University in New York, where he earned a bachelor of fine arts degree in dance.

But his love of dance was originally sparked by a more mainstream muse. As a child growing up in Maryland, he studied Janet Jackson videos with the intensity some reserve for schoolwork.

"I, for so long, wanted to be a backup dancer for her," Harder says. "It was something that I just knew could happen because I was completely enamored with her."

On his path to joining Janet's rhythm nation, Harder learned that behind the hip-hop moves, all her dancers had classical dance backgrounds.

"So that's when I fell in love with those," Harder says. "Because I said, 'If they've done it, then that's what I need to do.'"

And now that audiences can watch him living out one of his dreams, he says there's only one left to go.

"If Janet called me," he says, "I'd be there."