

An Alvin Ailey Dance Star Comes Home

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By Matthew Reed Baker



Kirven James Boyd. Photo by Andrew Eccles

Back when he was five years old, Kirven James Boyd was just a Dorchester boy, growing up near Franklin Park. His parents enrolled him in a couple of jazz dance competitions, but like any young kid, his interests shifted around, and soon he was doing karate and gymnastics. But thankfully, by the time he was a teen, he returned to the floorboards: Now 26, he's been with the legendary Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for seven years, and he's bringing some of his colleagues to BU's Tsai Performance Center this weekend.

"I always was an active kid involved in something," Boyd says. "With gymnastics, I did a lot of tumbling, but it was the dancing that helped me discover grace and the quality of movement."

And his path of discovery was laid right here in Boston, through a mix of talent, drive, and great timing. The Boston Arts Academy was first opened in 1998; Boyd enrolled in the fall. The following spring, he saw a performance put on by Boston Youth Moves, the local program that teaches teens from 13 to 19, and soon he was enrolled there too. That same year, he saw the Ailey dancers perform in Boston for the first time — the world's premier African American corps blew him away and set a standard to strive for.

"Having seen the Ailey company then, I didn't even put myself in the equation," Boyd says. "It seemed so out of my league, but it made me hungry for dance and to do it well." And at BYM, he learned a variety of different techniques such as ballet, modern jazz, and tap. "The experience taught me discipline and what it takes to maintain yourself in a professional setting. You have to learn to be someone that's open and willing to work with anybody and willing to work on anything, and at BYM they throw so many different things there at you."

In conversation, Boyd doesn't exactly boast. How he got to Ailey is a quick tale, but also because it happened so fast. He casually mentions that he graduated from high school in 2002 and then moved to New York to train with the Ailey company he dreamed of as a fellowship student. Soon he joined Ailey II, the second corps, and quietly made a good impression.

"I was shy and didn't talk to too many people," he says. "I tried to get as much information as I could and I thought I was under the radar." In fact, during a trip back home, he saw the primary Ailey company perform in Boston and waited afterwards to get an autograph from one of its stars at the time, Jeffrey Gerodias. Turns out Gerodias was on the phone with one of Ailey's directors who had been admiring Boyd's skills — Gerodias handed Boyd the cellphone and the fateful audition was set in play. By 2004, Boyd was finally part of Ailey, and has been there ever since.

"The feeling was indescribable," Boyd says. "I was surrounded by dancers who inspired me to dance in the first place. I always stress to young dancers that you need to know what's come before you, so you know what's expected of you....It was a blessing and a curse that I got into the company when I was 19. I was intimidated and scared, so I had to grow up quickly, but I think because of that I was so open to everything, to grow as an artist and learn from what was around me."

Since then, he's traveled the world and performed at the White House, in honor of Ailey's longtime artistic director Judith Jamison, who retires this summer. In fact, the shows this Friday and Saturday at BU are part of Boyd's own tribute to her. Boston Youth Moves is giving her a lifetime achievement award at its annual Swellegance gala, and even though the Ailey company itself is not scheduled to come to Boston this year, Boyd has brought several of his colleagues with him to perform original works, several with BYM students.

In the long run, Boyd sees his entire BYM and Ailey experience as a broader learning experience that he can draw from when his body no longer lets him do the amazing things he's capable of now. He's done some choreography and would love to continue, but even more he'd love to be the director of an arts program, where he could hire a staff of great dancers to train people like the boy he used to be. Until then, though, it's just good to be home.

"I like to get back to Boston at least twice a year," Boyd says. "I visit my family and my friends, and go to the old stomping grounds where I hung out as a kid. This event, with dance and in my hometown...it's like bringing my two favorite things together."



Photo by Andrew Eccles