

teach-learn connection



OWLAG students with Troy Powell after his class at the Joan Weill Center for Dance

CENTERWORK

Building Leaders Through Dance

A former Ailey star inspires students at Oprah's academy.

BY SIOBHAN BURKE

"I feel like I'm leaving my child!" calls out Dwana Smallwood, as the studio door clicks shut behind her. She feigns a weeping expression—wide eyes glancing backward, lithe arms gesturing longingly—then lets out a self-effacing laugh, knowing she'll be back right after lunch.

But she's only partially joking. For the former Ailey star, who moved to South Africa in 2009 to teach at the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls (OWLAG), the 15 young women in that studio are indeed a kind of family.

Those students, members of the OWLAG Dance Company, have just begun taking a Horton technique class with Ailey II director Troy Powell, who was Smallwood's friend and frequent dance partner during her 12 years as one of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's most celebrated dancers. Looking poised in identical outfits—black leggings and chocolate-brown leotards—the girls roll down through their spines, slowly, a bit tentatively. It's a quiet, focused moment in what has so far been a whirlwind trip to New York, a week spent taking workshops, seeing shows, venturing to Bedford-Stuyvesant (the Brooklyn neighborhood where Smallwood grew up), and performing at an OWLAG gala, where the likes of Alicia

Keys, Mary J. Blige, and, of course, Oprah Winfrey, were in the audience.

But this particular late-April afternoon holds special significance: In bringing her students to the Joan Weill Center for Dance, home of AAADT, Smallwood is coming full circle, introducing the students she's taken under her wing to the people and places that once took her under theirs. "Judith Jamison is my mentor," Smallwood says of the Ailey company's formidable artistic director emerita. "She helped me to grow into a caring and sharing person who wasn't afraid to be onstage and say, 'This is all I am—take it or leave it. If you don't like it, you don't have to watch. But I'm gonna give you everything I have.'"

That's the kind of message that Smallwood is passing on at OWLAG, and it comes through in the words of her students. When asked about the challenges of dancing, 11th-grader Zimkita Mpumpula replies, "I don't have the best dancer body, so that becomes a challenge for me. But I still embrace it and just walk with my head held high. I'm a different dancer; I can't be the same as everyone else."

It's not just Smallwood who fosters this kind of self-confidence but the overarching philosophy of a school that

aims to educate a new generation of South African women leaders. Winfrey opened OWLAG in 2007, a \$40-million endeavor, for academically talented girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. Though opposed by critics who believed that those millions should have been spent on U.S. schools, the academy has a much-needed place in a post-apartheid society where violence against women remains tragically common. In January, the school saluted the members of its first graduating class, all of whom were going off to college.

Smallwood began teaching at OWLAG after performing an excerpt of Alvin Ailey's *Cry* on a 2007 episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* that featured women at the top of their fields. "How I got to that show? I have no idea," Smallwood says. "Divine intervention. Because I'm not the best in my field. I know some dancers who are unbelievable. I wasn't your average-looking dancer who could hold their leg up here for like nine years. But I always danced from an honest place, and I guess people found that respectful."

Soon after Smallwood's TV appearance, Winfrey, a longtime fan of the Ailey company, asked the dancer to teach a two-week arts workshop at OWLAG, which is located in the village of Henley on Klip and now includes grades 7

through 12. At Winfrey's invitation, two weeks evolved into one year—then two, three, four. Smallwood, who describes her work at the school as "a calling," not only developed academic and co-curricular dance classes but also became the director of student affairs and founded the OWLAG Dance Company, which presents concerts and tours to neighboring towns. "It was Ms. Winfrey who wanted dance in the program," recalls Smallwood. "I'm assuming she saw that I was teaching more than dance. I was teaching these girls how to love themselves for real, from the inside out. I was just using dance as a tool."

Elaborating on her approach in the classroom, Smallwood adds, "I teach from the heart first, and then I teach the technique, because that's what dance was for me. It was an escape from whatever was wrong, whatever insecurities I had. When I danced I was powerful, I was fierce, I was amazing." Jamison helped her tap into that fierceness, but not without holding her to the highest standard. "She was always on me," Smallwood laughs, launching into an affectionate imitation: "Dwana, you don't chew gum in public. Dwana, you don't dress like that in the airport—no sweatpants, no sneakers. Dwana, when you were onstage, I noticed you were standing. Remember—you're always performing, even when you're standing."

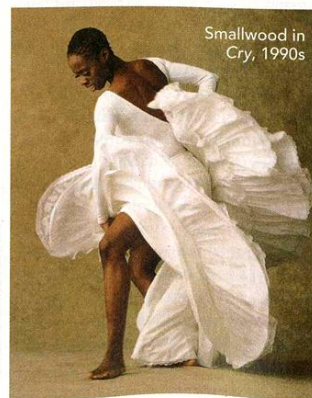
While Smallwood is deeply committed to her work in South Africa, she describes feeling torn between staying there and returning to Bedford-Stuyvesant. "There's so much work to be done in our communities, my community in particular," she says. "I want to still be there at OWLAG, but to simultaneously be building a school here. If I could do that,

I'd feel like I had lived my life's purpose."

For her students, some of whom hope to dance professionally, Smallwood has become what Jamison was to her: a mentor both in and out of the studio. "What I like about Sis Dwana," says 17-year-old Nelisiwe Ncama, using the familial title that seems to be the norm at OWLAG (Winfrey goes by "Mom Oprah"), "is that she's not just a teacher, she's also an inspiration. She's a mother, a sister. So it's not all about dance, it's also about the love she gives us, the encouragement. She always pushes us to the best, best level of ourselves."

Those earnest testaments can sound clichéd—until you see the OWLAG students dance. By the end of Powell's class, when Smallwood returns for the last 15 minutes, the energy in the room has shifted dramatically. Inhibitions have given way to exuberant, fearless dedication. "And TI!" the girls shout over the rhythms of the conga drum, tilting into a signature Horton pose. Some of them pick up the bold, angular combinations faster than others, but no one appears discouraged, greeting their own mistakes with good-natured laughter. Smallwood looks on from the sidelines, beaming, as she exchanges quiet words of admiration with the regal figure who has just entered the room, Judith Jamison.

Siohban Burke is a Dance Magazine associate editor.



Smallwood in *Cry*, 1990s

Andrew Eccles, Courtesy AAADT

Joe Epstein, Courtesy AAADT