

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater defies gravity in Revelations

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By Janet Smith



Dancer Antonio Douthit stretches his limbs in Alvin Ailey's iconic ballet, *Revelations*.

Pictures of Antonio Douthit almost always picture him airborne, jumping through the air with his preternaturally long limbs extended, or, as seen in *Vogue* this month, kicking out like some balletic, gravity-defying ninja.

It turns out that image of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater member is a perfect metaphor for where he is, how he got there, and where he comes from. Douthit has taken a huge leap in life, from a hard-knocks upbringing in St. Louis, Missouri, to one of America's greatest ballet companies. But the road wasn't always easy.

"I definitely believe that I was born with a gift, but the hardest part is owning up to what you've been given. There are people that don't want to put in the work," the modest, well-spoken dancer tells the

Straight just after his tour bus rolls up to a hotel in Detroit, the latest road stop in a journey that started in February and will wrap in May.

"Something about me... I just had to make it better. I think it was that for so long as a kid I wanted to find something that fitted me. And I kind of drifted through my childhood. So dance was something where I could finally say, 'I can do this,' and I worked hard so I could get praise."

As a boy, Douthit had gotten used to living in homeless shelters with his mother. Despite his athleticism, he says he never got into sports. It wasn't till he was 16 that he and his friends were hanging around and decided to crash a local dance class that he found his calling. The teacher immediately recognized his natural talent and encouraged him to enrol at the city's Center of Creative Arts.

Soon after that, at 17, that he got the chance to see Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater on a field trip with the centre. The troupe was performing an iconic 1960 work by Ailey himself—*Revelations*, which Douthit is starring in this spring, as part of its 50th-anniversary remount that is coming to Vancouver.

"It's a masterpiece, but seeing it as a kid you don't understand the complexity and nature of the ballet," Douthit says, referring to the ode to African-American tenacity, from the grief of slavery through to the joy of freedom, set to old spirituals and blues songs like "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham" and "I Been 'Buked". "But that's when I said, 'I don't know how it's going to happen, but someday I want to be in that company.' There was something about the passion and the beauty of the company—you see the dancers' bodies here."

To get there, however, Douthit would have to put in superhuman work to catch up. "I was taking three or four dance classes a day with kids my age, and then some with kids five and six. I was this huge tall kid in class," he says with a laugh. "I was doing it to learn basic positions. I was very flexible; the big issue was technique."

Douthit's mother was keen to have him be the first person in the family to graduate from high school and wasn't convinced that anyone could make a career out of dance. But he persevered, all on scholarship, training with the

San Francisco Ballet and the Joffrey Ballet, before earning a place with Dance Theater of Harlem, and then Les Grands Ballets Canadiens. Finally, in 2004, legendary artistic director Judith Jamison asked him to join the company of his dreams.

By 2006, the *New York Times* was already singling him out for his role in “Sinner Man”, a high-velocity, ecstatic piece in *Revelations*: “The splendid Mr. Douthit is not so much a star in the making: he’s arrived.”

Now firmly ensconced as one of the stars in the troupe he so looked up to as a teen, Douthit has never forgotten his roots. Every January, instead of taking a vacation, he heads back to the centre in St. Louis to reach out to kids and open them up to dance.

“I feel like I had so much help from the St. Louis community,” he explains. “If I could just help one, two, three children, why not give back? It helps that the kids can relate more when I can say to them ‘I lived just down the street.’ They can say, ‘Oh that could be me.’?”

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater comes to the Queen Elizabeth Theatre on Friday and Saturday (March 18 and 19).