

Ailey's Kirven James Boyd on Being a Professional Dancer

November 15, 2011



Almost two months ago, Alvin Ailey contacted me and asked me if I'd like to run a piece on one of their dancers. Of course, I said "yes." They'd already featured this particular dancer, Kirven James Boyd, in an article on their [website](#) and wanted me to use this text; however, I requested that Kirven answer some questions specifically for me and this blog. He kindly obliged. It's taken me a few weeks to get it posted, but I am so pleased to be able to do so and to offer you an exclusive interview with Kirven and some insight into this young dancer's journey and some advice for other young male dancers on how to succeed in the world of professional dance.

Kirven began his formal dance training at the Boston Arts Academy and joined Boston Youth Moves in 1999 under the direction of Jim Viera and Jeannette Neill. He also trained on scholarship at the Boston Conservatory and as a fellowship student at The Ailey School. Kirven has danced with Battleworks Dance Company, The Parsons Dance Company and Ailey II. He performed at the White House tribute to Judith Jamison in

2010. Mr. Boyd joined the Ailey in 2004.

Kirven literally jumped into the spotlight this year as the featured dancer on Ailey's 2011-12 season poster in a pose from the "Sinner Man" section of Mr. Ailey's Revelations. I find it interesting to know that he still gets nervous every time he dances "Sinner Man." He related in [the piece on Ailey's website](#), "I remember being a young dancer in Boston and going to the Wang Theater to watch the Ailey company perform. I loved everything that they did, but I was always the most excited to see *Revelations*. I remember the energy of the audience at the beginning of "Sinner Man" and how they were on the edge of their seats, waiting for that feeling that comes at the end of it. As Company members, we're continuing a legacy of great dancers and performing "Sinner Man" will always be important to me. I'm honored and overwhelmed to be featured on this season's poster and by what it means to be a part of Ailey history."

Every young man wants to be able to say those words...to follow in the footsteps of great dancers and to play the roles they remember and love.

Kirven talked about rehearsing for *Arden Court* by Paul Taylor and *Home* by Rennie Harris, both of which are premieres for the Company [here](#), and said, "This experience is one of many reasons why I wanted to be a part of Ailey. We get to work with so many choreographers; it challenges us to forget what we know and become something different. If we fully commit to that, then we learn a great deal about ourselves as artists and people." That comment got me thinking, so I began my interview with him on that note.

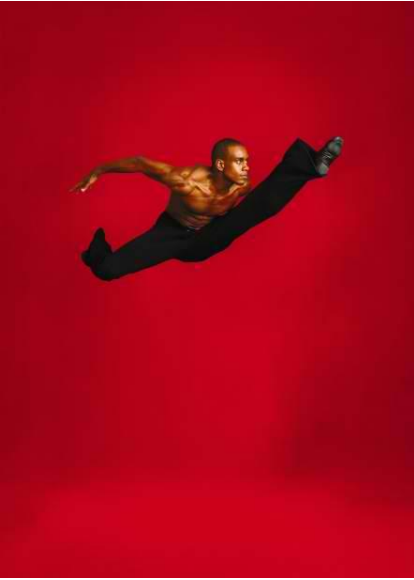
Young dancers struggle to find out who they are. They are often teased, and try to conform in dress and action so they will fit in even though essentially their dancing in some way makes them different from other kids their age. What was your experience of growing up? Did you know who you were or have a strong sense of identity?

I grew up in a very supportive family and because of this I never felt obligated to change anything about myself to fit what was considered "cool." I can't say that I was never teased, but when faced with that kind of situation I didn't let it deter me from achieving my goals. I feel like I've always known that I was going to be a dancer and I never struggled with finding who I was or what I would do with my life. I owe a great deal of that to my family and teachers, who always had very high expectations of me.



Has being in a company like Ailey helped you discover who you are?

You have to have a strong sense of who you are before joining a professional dance company. There are so many things that go into running a large company like Ailey, and you have to be strong or else it can be really overwhelming.



I learned upon coming into the company that I had to be patient with myself. This is some of the most difficult work that I've ever done, and in order to do it well I knew that I had to stay calm and work as hard as I could. I wouldn't say that being in this company helped me discover who I am, but as my career has progressed I've found that different roles bring out different parts of me. So I'm always learning something new about myself.

Often kids are told they are natural “movers.” Ballet dancers can become stiff, while modern and contemporary, as well as jazz and hip hop dancers, can be much more fluid. To what do you attribute your ability to move, and what tips or suggestions would you give other young male dancers so they might find it easier to adapt to the movement in a company like Ailey?

I think that all dance starts with movement, so before you even learn the basics of the different techniques, there must be some sense of one's own movement quality. As dancers we have to be open to exploring our range of movement. I was fortunate enough to have trained under teachers that believed the quality of your movement is just as important as being technically proficient. Sometimes “technicians,” or dancers

that only care about showing how good they are technically, can be considered boring. I think that the best dancers are the ones that trust in their technique enough to let the quality of their movement take the audience on a journey. Dance has to make both the dancers and the audience feel like they've been moved in some way, and it can't be done standing straight up.

I would say to young men that if Ailey is your goal, you have to be fearless. You're going to be asked to do so many different things, and you have to be able to dive into whatever it is wholeheartedly and without any doubt of what you're capable of.

What were the three most important things you did that helped you become a professional dancer?

Discipline is one of the most important things that I learned as a young dancer. Without it there can be no change, and without change there's no growth. As artists we're always trying to grow and become better at what we do.

Another important thing that I learned was I had to be open to the work I was given and be a person that was considered to be “easy to work with.” I was taught that I had to give my all to whatever I was doing and be open minded enough to know that there's always room for improvement.

I also learned that I must pay attention to what's going on in front of the room even if I'm not on the floor. You learn so much from just being observant, and it's also important to know what's going on around you.

Did you attend college (and, if so, where), and do you think college is necessary or helpful for male dancers?

I was supposed to attend the BFA program at the Boston Conservatory in the fall of 2002. I attended the Ailey school the summer before and was asked to join Ailey II. I deferred from the program and took the opportunity to join the junior company. I thought that I would learn a great deal about the life of a professional, but the plan was to go to school when it was over. My plan was sidetracked by my getting into the Ailey company.

Everyone's path is different. I really wanted to go to school so that I would be prepared for this kind of job. I encourage young dancers to go to college, but if a good opportunity comes up, really weigh all of the pros and cons and try to make the best decision.

What is your weakest dance area, and what do you do to strengthen it?

I'm constantly working on all parts of my dancing from my facility to actual dance steps. I'm always trying to strengthen all areas of my dancing.