

Gary native living his dream in Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

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By Eloise Valadez

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will perform Wednesday through April 15 at Chicago's Auditorium Theatre. Pictured is a scene from the work "Home."

When Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater brings its show to The Auditorium Theatre this week, it'll be the first time Gary native Renaldo Gardner dances in Chicagoland as a member of the legendary main Ailey company.

Gardner, a former member of the troupe's junior company, Ailey II, joined the stellar Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater last summer. "I'm honored to be in the main company," said Gardner, during a recent phone interview.

The company will perform Wednesday through April 15 at Chicago's Auditorium Theatre. On the roster will be a variety of new works as well as Ailey favorites. Gardner said his family and friends are expected to be in the audience for many of the shows.

"I'd like them to see how I've grown, how much I've accomplished and how happy I am being in the main company," he said.

The 21-year-old dancer became a member of the Ailey senior troupe on May 31 last year, which is his birthday.

"This is going to be a diverse program," Gardner said of the current show.

Among works performed will be "Takademe," with choreography by the troupe's artistic director Robert Battle; "Home," choreographed by Rennie Harris, which revolves around people living with HIV; and Ohad Naharin's "Minus 16."

Ailey's "Revelations" will surely be on the performance agenda, as the classic work always closes the show.

"'Revelations' is one of Ailey's richest treasures. It's a journey for me. As a young man, it challenges me mentally, physically and spiritually," he said.

Gardner came home to Northwest Indiana when Ailey II performed at Gary's West Side Theatre Guild in February. Though he was already a member of the main troupe, Gardner performed a special number for students during a matinee performance and then afterward was given the key to the city of Gary by Mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson.

"When I was fortunate to get the key from the city, I had a big group of family and friends who came out to support me," Gardner said.

First and foremost, his mother Ruby Lee Smith was there beaming and also shedding tears of joy.

"She is so proud of me," Gardner said. "Without my mom, I don't know where I'd be. She was a single mom and she paid for everything for me. And she always encouraged me and always wanted me to be happy," Gardner said.

During an interview with Gardner's mom, she said "I'm proud to see him living his dream. It's what he wanted to do in life. Since he was a baby he was saying he wanted to dance."

Though Smith said she never had any aspirations to be a professional dancer, she loved to dance socially.

"Everytime 'Soul Train' was on, I'd dance. And I was dancing when I was pregnant with Renaldo," she said, with a laugh.



Photo by Paul Kolnik

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