

August 12, 2012

THE WEEK AHEAD

Snapshot

Kyle Abraham

On Pittsburgh And the Peace Sign

WHEN it comes to cities that fuel the creative fire, Pittsburgh isn't usually the first to spring to mind. But don't tell Kyle Abraham. This dancer and choreographer has been mining that town for material his entire career. Born there into the hip-hop culture of the late 1970s, Mr. Abraham, 34, mixes that influence with classical music and movement training. In 2010 he caught the eye of the dance world with "The Radio Show," which was inspired by a Pittsburgh station and earned him a Bessie Award. It dealt with race and identity, issues he's explored throughout his work. Then came "Live! The Realest MC," loosely based on the story of Pinocchio and an autobiographical look at coming out in a hip-hop world.

This year has propelled him into another realm. Among many other accolades, he was awarded the Jacob's Pillow Dance Award in June.

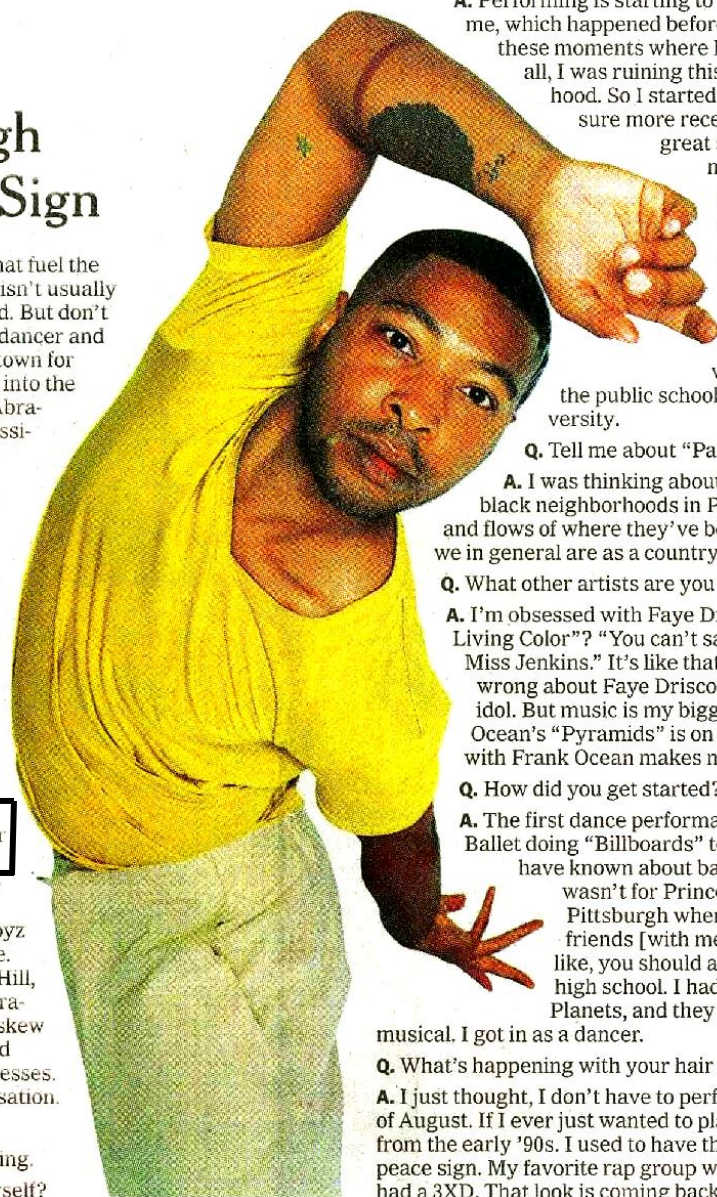
He's choreographing a piece for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for a December premiere. In November at Harlem Stages, his company, Abraham.In.Motion, will present "Pavement," drawing on the 1991 movie "Boyz n the Hood," and Pittsburgh of course.

As he sat outside a cafe in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, where he now lives, Mr. Abraham, with his baseball cap stylishly askew — "Pittsburgh" set off in gold — talked with Julie Bloom about his latest successes. These are excerpts from their conversation.

Q. What's this year been like?

A. It's been really insane and exhausting.

Q. Has this changed how you see yourself?



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THE NEW YORK TIMES

A. Performing is starting to get to a scary place for me, which happened before. I kind of was having these moments where I felt like if I messed up at all, I was ruining this artist's work, their livelihood. So I started feeling this kind of pressure more recently because of all this great stuff that's come up — to not-mess up.

Q. What is it about Pittsburgh?

A. I think for the most part we have a lot of hometown pride. It's such an amazing city. It's very blue collar. It's very art friendly. Most of

the public schools have this amazing diversity.

Q. Tell me about "Pavement."

A. I was thinking about these two historically black neighborhoods in Pittsburgh, and the ebbs and flows of where they've been culturally and where we in general are as a country.

Q. What other artists are you paying attention to?

A. I'm obsessed with Faye Driscoll. Remember "In Living Color"? "You can't say nothing wrong about Miss Jenkins." It's like that. You can't say nothing wrong about Faye Driscoll. Ralph Lemon is my idol. But music is my biggest passion. Frank Ocean's "Pyramids" is on repeat. That kind of stuff with Frank Ocean makes me cry.

Q. How did you get started?

A. The first dance performance I saw was Joffrey Ballet doing "Billboards" to Prince. I never would have known about ballet or anything if it wasn't for Prince, so I went to see them in Pittsburgh when I was 16. One of the friends [with me] was a dancer. She was like, you should audition for the musical in high school. I had long hair, like Digable Planets, and they were doing a Caribbean

musical. I got in as a dancer.

Q. What's happening with your hair now?

A. I just thought, I don't have to perform for the whole month of August. If I ever just wanted to play, this is the time. It's from the early '90s. I used to have the map of Africa with a peace sign. My favorite rap group was Three Times Dope, so I had a 3XD. That look is coming back. I love it.