

URBAN GARDNER | By Ralph Gardner Jr.

Leaping Into History



I'm a fan of the New York City subway system. There are exceptions, of course—for

example, during morning rush hour when, half awake, the last place you want to be is sandwiched between two, or make that 14, strangers, your bodies in approximately 90% contact. Or when you're late for an appointment, the train lurches to a stop mid-tunnel and the conductor announces that responsibility for the delay lies with traffic ahead; you can't fathom how that's possible because you had to wait 20 minutes for the train, suggesting the tunnel is probably clear halfway to Coney Island.

On the other hand, when the system is working well, there's no faster way to get around town, short of teleportation. Thirty minutes before an appointment in TriBeCa, or even parts of Brooklyn, you can be searching for your keys in your apartment on the Upper East or West Side and still make it with a couple of minutes to spare.

However, there is one unfortunate aspect of the subway about which I think we're all in agreement: It's not the most



Kirven James Boyd is featured in this year's Alvin Ailey ad, left, seen in the subway system and elsewhere around the city. Right, Mr. Boyd practices a duet with Ghrai DeVore.



Ramsay de Giv for The Wall Street Journal; Bryan Derballa for The Wall Street Journal

aesthetically pleasing experience. Indeed, it would be hard to conceive of a situation less appealing to the senses. There is an exception, though, a radiant piece of décor that I'd be proud to hang in my living room, though my wife might take some convincing.

I'm speaking, of course, about the annual Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater poster. It feels almost ubiquitous around town, a form of exterior wallpaper—and not just in the subway, but also on buses, phone booths and anywhere else you can feasibly stick an ad.

It typically features one of the world's more attractive people, aka an Ailey dancer, in mid-flight. Their costumes, or occasionally lack of them, showcase the sort of athleticism and physiques the rest of us can only dream of.

Among the ways the Parisian Metro tops NYC Transit—besides clean, quiet trains that run regularly and on time—are its ads; often posters that feature beautiful models wearing nothing more than sunscreen or cold cream, or whatever it is they're hawking. The Ailey posters are our response, proof that as Americans we're also capable of tastefully celebrating the human body.

I'm thinking of one poster in particular: It was last season's, and it starred company member Linda Celeste Sims looking like an airborne citizen of Avatar's Pandora. She's dressed in not much more than strategically placed streamers of turquoise body paint. "Everyone loved that year," Ms. Sims recalled when I met her backstage after a packed Ailey matinee performance the week before Christmas. "But it wasn't cool to stand there two-

and-a-half hours," until the paint dried.

The dancer, who grew up in the city and attended La Guardia High School of the Performing Arts, wasn't dressed in the poster costume that gained her fame, at least of a sort. She was wearing a no-nonsense Ailey workout uniform. "People never recognize me," she sighed, though she sounded more amused than disappointed. "I have apparently many looks. People rarely know who I am."

She thought it might have something to do with her glasses, or her hair. In the 2010 poster—her fourth since 2001, possibly a company record—it floats wild and free, as if she's traveling through zero-gravity. When I encountered her, it was straight and tied back in a demure ponytail.

Nonetheless, I'm not sure that's the entire reason she can commute from her New Rochelle home anonymously. If she executed a couple of flying leaps in a leotard while waiting on the platform for her Metro North train, I have no doubt crowds would form. "I'll stand in front of the poster for fun," she said, just to see if anyone recognizes her.

One time she was on the train going to work with her husband Glenn Allen Sims, who also dances with the company, and pointed out a rider whose newspaper was open to the ad. "This guy is staring at the poster one row in front of

me. I said, 'Sir, mind if I have the arts section?'" Still, he didn't recognize her. "I'm not like Demi Moore or something. You have to know or worship Ailey."

While fame outside the context of the company may elude her, being chosen for the poster is considered an honor within the Ailey family. "It's very ceremonial, in a way," acknowledged Robert Battle, who became the company's artistic director—only the third in Alvin Ailey's 54-year history—in July. He recalled how he deliv-

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ered the good news to Kirven James Boyd, the poster model for the current season, which just ended.

"I had him brought out of rehearsal," Mr. Battle said. "I showed him a mock-up of the poster. It's a moving kind of thing. They become a part of the history of the company, especially this season."

The image shows Mr. Boyd leaping through space in black stretch pants and matching ballet slippers, naked from the waist up. The costume and the pose are from the dance "Sinner Man."

"That jump looks like he's a

jet taking off," Mr. Battle explained. "I was also making a statement to Ailey fans that we were still Ailey but moving into the future."

Mr. Boyd's roommate, Antonio Douthit, a fellow Ailey dancer, confided that the poster doesn't hang in their apartment. "There's no reason you have to go home and look at it," he explained, referring to the image's ubiquity.

Perhaps even more exciting than encountering it in New York is spotting it abroad, when the company performs in places such as Paris and Russia. Mr. Boyd also said that he's particularly anticipating seeing it on billboards when he returns to Boston, his hometown, when Ailey touches down there in April. "When I was growing up I remember seeing all the Ailey posters around Boston," he remembered. "It will be cool for my friends and family to see pictures of me."

Mr. Boyd said he's yet to be recognized from his poster, either. He recalled when the company played Kansas City in November. "I'm on line buying T-shirts with my image on it. No one put two and two together. As the cashier is ringing it up she says, 'Are you one of the dancers?'"

Mr. Boyd confessed that he was, assuming he'd finally been recognized. "She said, 'Oh, you get a discount.'"

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