

# The Bulletin

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## Hip-Hop Dance, Casually Airborne With A Hint Of Ballet

By: Lindsay Warner , The Bulletin

Philadelphia - There's something alluring and a little bit mysterious about hip-hop dance, even performed informally on the street by a group of teenagers killing time. It's enough to give you pause for a minute or two to watch feet spinning in the air, sometimes supported by just one hand firmly planted on the ground, and other times casually airborne. For Abdur-Rahim Jackson, the appeal of street dancing was a tangible push toward his eventual career as an Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater member, performing this weekend at the Kimmel Center.

"When I first saw people doing hip-hop on the streets in West Philly where I grew up, I was like 'how can you move your feet in that way?' " Mr. Jackson said. "One of my friends taught me, and that feeling that took over was magical. It was a new way to move and express your body, and it was oxygen to me, just the pure innocence of the drive of wanting to dance."

Drawn to enroll in an after-school dance program at the age of 10 even though dancing wasn't considered "cool" for boys growing up in West Philadelphia, Mr. Jackson continued moving through the ranks of dance and theater training, enrolling next in the New Freedom Theatre's dance and drama program. The New Freedom Theatre, which has been the initial training ground for tens of thousands of budding artists, served Mr. Jackson's voracious dance appetite for two years, until his teacher sadly admitted there wasn't any more she could teach him, and suggested he apply to Philadanco, Philadelphia's premier modern company.

Training and diplomas at both Philadanco and Juilliard followed, spurred by videos Mr. Jackson's mother had taped for him of a company founded by a man named Alvin Ailey.

"I looked at those videos and I was blown away," he said. "I thought 'wow, if I continue, I can dance and express emotion like that.' I would watch them every day to see the standards I'd have to meet."

Several years later, Mr. Jackson found himself personally experiencing the standards of Alvin Ailey as a member of the company under the direction of Judith Jamison, also a Philadelphia native, who has been with the company 19 years.

"The standards are tough; you have to be able to do everything," noted Mr. Jackson, now a seven-year veteran of the company. "We do all styles, from the piece that [Philadelphia hip-hop dancer] Rennie Harris choreographed, to classical. Mr. Ailey always said that he loved modern upper bodies and ballet legs, which means very sharp and clear legs. That was different. Before, you were either modern or ballet, but he wanted to fuse the two and create a place for people to do all kinds of dancing."

This year, the AAADCT celebrates its 50th anniversary, performing both retrospective and forward-moving pieces over an extended celebration of the company's founder. Pieces from various choreographers, including Mr. Jackson, fill the program, which embraces everything from Stravinsky's Firebird to Rennie Harris' hip hop.

"Mr. Ailey always wanted to encourage other people to choreograph and contribute a variety of styles, and Ms. Jamison continued that legacy," said Mr. Jackson. "I think of Philadelphia as a real melting pot. Ms. Jamison is also from Philly, so she brings something new and forward-moving to the repertoire."

As appropriate for an anniversary, the AAADTC will also revisit Mr. Ailey's first breakout piece, "Blues Suite," exploring African-American origins and Mr. Ailey's childhood in Texas.

"To have 'Blues Suite' still 50 years later is very special," said Mr. Jackson. "It represents a dream that one man had that has become related to all of us. It shows that if you have a passion or dream, you can attain it if you work incredibly hard."

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