

'THE VISIBILITY OF BLACK BALLET DANCERS IS IMPORTANT'

US dancer Jeroboam Bozeman on performing with the legendary Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and why black ballet dancers are no longer taboo

BY DAVNA HAMILTON

A recent *New York Times* article declared that US dancer Jeroboam Bozeman is "having a breakout season." The same could be said of ballet as a whole, particularly when it comes to the visibility of black dancers.

There's no denying that ballet has long-been perceived as an art form reserved for white dancers and a white elite audience. Revered Cuban dancer Carlos Acosta once said that the overwhelming opinion among classical dance directors is that "a black ballerina in the middle of a flock of white swans would somehow alter the harmony."

But times are changing. From the international prominence of the aforementioned Acosta, to the success of US dancer Misty Copeland, who made history last year when she was named as the first black principal ballerina of the prestigious American Ballet Theatre, many barriers have been broken when it comes to dispelling the awful myth that ballet is neither for black dancers or black audiences.

Also at the helm of driving this change is the legendary company, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Born out of a 1958 dance performance led by the late Alvin Ailey and a group of young



TALENT: Jeroboam Bozeman

black dancers, the company has continued to showcase the talents of countless black performers for over 50 years; bringing the joy of dance to audiences worldwide.

"Being part of the Ailey organisation is like my dream come true," says 26-year-old Bozeman, who joined the company in 2013.

"Being a young boy in Brooklyn, I didn't think dancing for the Ailey company was possible or tangible. As I got older, I realised it was a possibility.

"I auditioned for the company five times before I got in! But it was so worth it. We get to travel the world, sharing the gift of dance – and dance is universal. We can travel to many countries and there may be a language barrier, but one thing people can always understand is movement. People can understand a story that is told through dance; they can connect to it and it doesn't require words. That's the beauty of it."

Aside from delivering phenomenal dance works, including their legendary piece, *Revelations*, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater also delivers educational outreach. Through a range of programmes, they bring dance into classrooms and communities with lecture-demonstrations, technique classes and curriculum-based residencies.



SKILLS: Bozeman in Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's signature piece, *Revelations*

"Another thing I love is that they're very big on outreach and giving back," Bozeman says of the company, which will return to the UK this month for a national tour.

"Mr Ailey believed that dance came from the people and that it should be given back to the people and I love that.

"I was introduced to dance when some dancers came to my school and gave a lecture demonstration. I was like, 'Oh my gosh – black dancers? Who look like me? Who are actually dancing? How can I be a part of this?'"

Describing himself as an "introvert" as a child, Bozeman says it was dance that allowed him to express himself.

"I was always shy and timid and dance was my outlet. It was always healing and therapeutic for me.

"I was always dancing at home, watching Michael Jackson videos and trying to imitate his moves. And in my neighbourhood, we had block parties, and I would go to them and just dance!"

It was in junior high, after deciding to take dance more seriously, that Bozeman started to get formal training.

"My first dance teacher really helped to bring dance out of me; she gave me order and a formula that would work. We did ballet, West African dance, modern, partnering – our teacher tried to expose us to as much dance as possible."

Embarking on this training at the age of 12, Bozeman admits that he did get jibes from some of his peers, who felt that dancing was for girls.

"I did get teased about dancing when I was younger. But I never really focused on that; I didn't give it much attention. When I danced, I was happy and I've always been about doing things that make me happy.

"Also, my first teacher exposed me to different types of dancers – male and female – as well as dancers of colour. I remember being in her studio and she had two Alvin Ailey posters. That made me think, 'Oh wow, a black, male dancer – I can do this!'"

Bozeman's first teacher also introduced him to the first dance school he joined – the Creative Outlet Dance Theatre of Brooklyn, which is where he began to really hone in on his craft.

Bozeman went on to dance with organisations including the Philadelphia Dance Company and Donald Byrd Spectrum Dance Theater, and he performed in Elton John and Tim Rice's Broadway musical *Aida*, which toured in China.

(Bozeman actually picked up some Mandarin in order to communicate while in China. "I'm not fluent, but I guess I'm

Through his own career, Bozeman is also adding to the "visibility" of black dancers. So what advice would he give to aspiring performers, particularly young black boys, who may want to dance but fear they'll face the stigma that dancing is for girls?

"I would tell young, black boys, who aspire to dance to follow their hearts. Dance is not easy; it's going to be challenging. But you have to be unconditionally invested in doing the work. That means doing your research, learning about the dancers that came before you, remaining encouraged and making sure you're being exposed to as much dance as possible.

"Expand on your creativity, always focus on cultivating the greater good and don't put any attention on any negativity – it only serves as a distraction."

Alvin Ailey Dance Theater will embark on a UK tour, starting at Sadler's Wells, London, from September 6-17, before performing in cities including Plymouth, Birmingham, Nottingham and Cardiff. For full tour dates, visit: www.danceconsortium.com

conversational," he says.)

Earning critical acclaim along the way, Bozeman was hailed by *The New York Times* for his "singular, rugged grace" and for possessing "velvety fluidness."

Recognising the changing perceptions of ballet, does Bozeman credit the likes of Misty Copeland for inspiring a new generation of black ballerinas?

"Oh, definitely," says the dancer, who is also studying for a degree in psychology.

"Dancers like Misty Copeland are certainly assisting with breaking down the barriers and dispelling the myth that black dancers can't do ballet. But before Misty Copeland, there was Raven Wilkinson, there was Carmen de Lavallade, Janet Collins, Lauren Anderson – these were women who broke the barriers that allowed dancers like Misty Copeland to have an opportunity to flourish. So we are making progress.

"There was a time when the idea of a black dancer doing ballet was almost taboo. Now, with social media and various other outlets, we're getting the opportunity to see many people of colour doing ballet. That visibility is important. The more that we're able to see it, the more that we believe it is possible."