

# The New York Times

## The Passionate Humility of Solomon Dumas

By: Gia Kourlas

December 28, 2018

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Ascending from Alvin Ailey summer camp to the main stage. BY GIA KOURLAS

# The Passionate Humility of Solomon Dumas

This Alvin Ailey dancer, the first to go from AileyCamp to the main company, has had a breakout season with leading roles in two major premieres.

By GIA KOURLAS

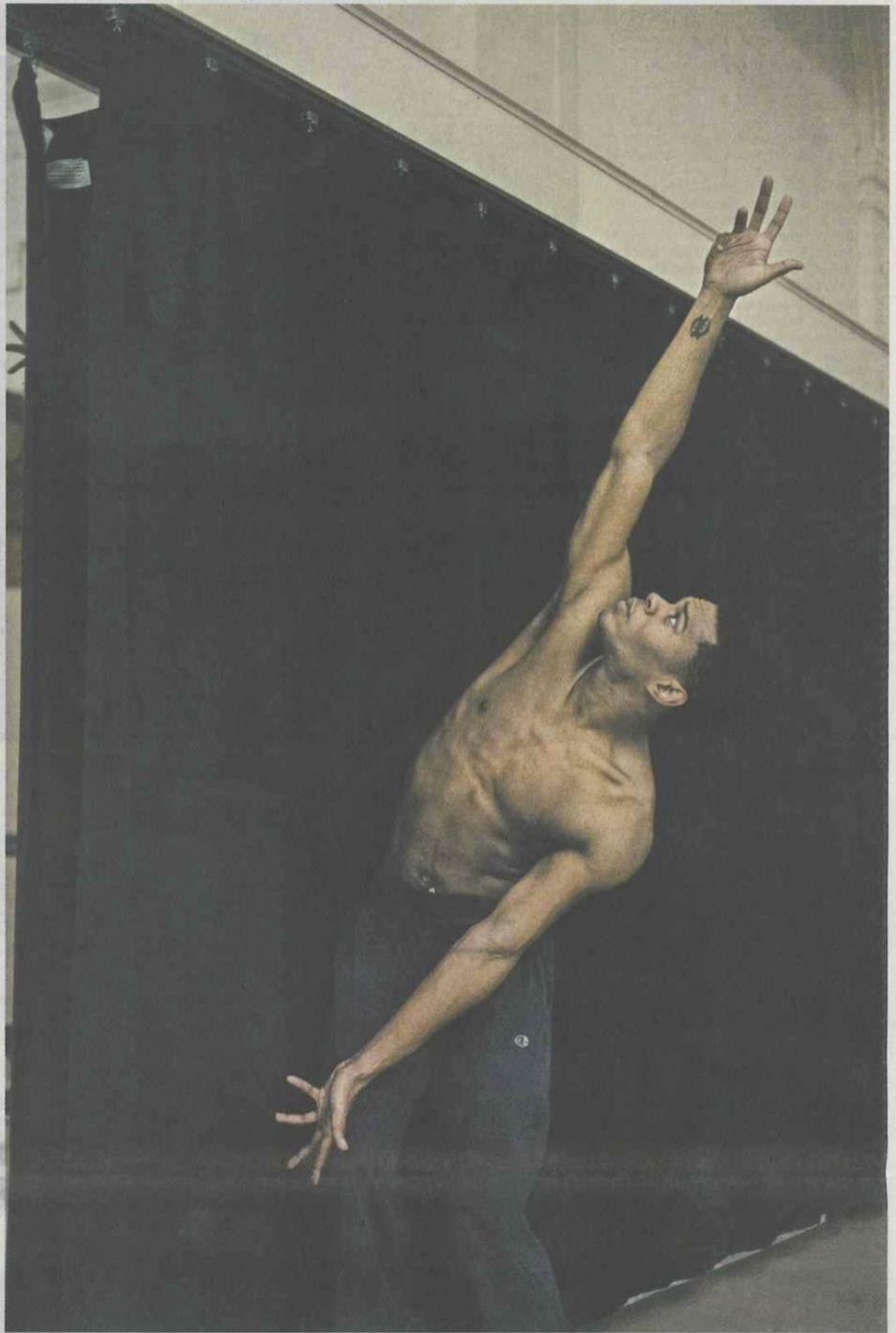
A dancer isn't always born a dancer. Sometimes a mother has to step in.

Growing up on the South Side of Chicago with his single working mother, Solomon Dumas was involved in community theater and interested in the arts. But dance wasn't much of a presence in his life until his mother signed him up for AileyCamp, when he was 12.

"She made me go," Mr. Dumas said. "My mother kept me busy. There wasn't a lot of idle time. She kept me in programs."

AileyCamp turned out to be a good choice.

"After that camp, I was completely obsessed," he said. "We learned discipline through dance and we started each day with affirmations. I remember receiving a souvenir program book, and I had never seen so many beautiful people in my life. I said, Oh my gosh, they look like me. Or I want to look like them. There was this ele-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JKE EDEANI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

'He doesn't dance small and he doesn't apologize when he's dancing. It's like butter and fire at the same time.'

RONALD K. BROWN  
CHOREOGRAPHER



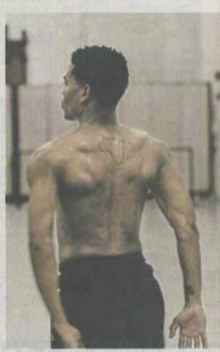
gance, this sophistication. And that was something that I needed to see at that time."

Mr. Dumas, nearing his third year in Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, is the only member to have started as an Ailey camper and gone on to join the main company. (AileyCamps — there were 10 in 2018 — are summer day camps for ages 11-14.) "I didn't realize I forced him," his mother, Beverly Rogers, said laughing. "It was just he went wherever I said to go. He never complained. He may have grunted a little bit, but I didn't pay that any attention."

Ms. Rogers can't say that she knew he was a dancer or an actor as a child, but recalled that before he could walk, whenever he heard music, he would bounce.

At 30, Mr. Dumas seems to have retained some of that bounce. Even when seated for an interview in the lounge at New York City Center — where the Ailey company's season continues through Sunday — his body





was full of vibrations that extended to slender fingers drumming rhythms on a table or gesticulating into the air. It's an energy that has been radiating from the stage this season, a spectacular one for Mr. Dumas, who danced leading parts in new works by Ronald K. Brown ("The Call") and Rennie Harris ("Lazarus").

Created as part of the company's 60th anniversary, and each in its way a homage to Ailey, they are two of the most important and affecting dances of the year — not just at the Ailey company, but period. They're meaningful, even masterly additions to the repertory, giving the company something to sink its physical and emotional weight into. That came through in the dancing, which was full of reverence and urgency.

In both premieres, Mr. Dumas showed his range, his unforced strength and his quiet, simmering power. He isn't flashy; his grounded presence is what makes him so beguiling. Robert Battle, the company's artistic director, said he had been especially moved by Mr. Dumas this season. "I almost didn't recognize him in a good way," Mr. Battle said. "He's kind of a chameleon."

The circumstances under which Mr. Dumas performed the lead in "The Call" were stressful. The morning of its premiere was just an ordinary day when he noticed that Masazumi Chaya, the group's associate artistic director, was watching company class. That was odd enough, but stranger still was that Mr. Chaya was watching *him*.

It turned out that Jamar Roberts, scheduled to dance the lead, was injured, and Mr. Brown, the choreographer, wanted Mr. Du-

mas to take over. Mr. Dumas was panicked. He didn't know the steps; his focus had been on his part in the dance's trio.

"I had to basically learn it within an hour," Mr. Dumas said. "I was like, 'I'm not ready, I'm not ready.'" But Mr. Brown pulled him aside. "When he asked me, I couldn't say no," said Mr. Dumas, who used to be a member of Mr. Brown's company. "You don't say no to Ron."

The two first worked together when Mr. Dumas was a student at the Ailey school. After Mr. Dumas completed two years with Ailey II, the company's junior division, he joined Mr. Brown's troupe. "I just waited my turn," Mr. Brown said.

Mr. Dumas knows about waiting his turn: His path to the main company hasn't been a direct one. After his AileyCamp experience, he attended the Chicago Academy for the Arts as well as at the Russell Talbert Dance Studio, where he continued his training after school. There, his focus was ballet. "I was in the studio until about 9 p.m. every day, even sometimes on Sundays."

Before he trained at the Ailey school, he was a member of Garth Fagan Dance. After leaving Mr. Brown's company, he was weighing his options: He was an instructor at Barry's Bootcamp, and had started acting classes. But there was an Ailey audition and he decided to go. It was his fifth try, and there was only one male spot open.

"I always thought if I got into the company it would be during this mass exodus when there were maybe four spots," he said. "I never thought that I would be the one guy. Because I wasn't the tall guy. I wasn't the

leggy guy. I was never that dancer known for the tricks and the things you would associate Ailey with."

Yet for Mr. Brown, he has a kind of passionate humility. "He goes for broke, but not like he's trying to impress you — and not like he even knows," he said. "He takes over the stage and is still kind of unassuming. He doesn't dance small and he doesn't apologize when he's dancing. It's like butter and fire at the same time."

This season, Mr. Dumas said he was grateful to spend so much time in the studio with choreographers like Mr. Brown, Mr. Harris and Twyla Tharp, who worked with him closely on "The Golden Section" (1981). The day she arrived was a memorable one. "I open the piece and as soon as I went across the floor, she stopped the music," he said. "I said, Oh God, this is the most embarrassing thing. She came to me and said: 'Look at me. You're holding back.'"

He started over; she stopped the music again and told him again, more firmly, that he was holding back. "And then I did it" — he snapped his fingers — "I don't know what clicked in. She said, 'That's what I'm talking about.' She kind of broke me down."

Ms. Tharp worked with the company for a week and spent so much time with Mr. Dumas that Mr. Battle said he wondered, "Is she going to take him and leave with him?" She taught him about daring: The difference between simply performing a role and dancing like you're not afraid to fall down.

But while Mr. Dumas is enjoying such challenges, he said he's not one of those dancers who plans to stay in the company for 20 years. "Hell, no," he said, laughing. But "only because there are so many other things that I want to do dance-wise — and everything else."

At the same time, he knows that, well, you never know. He said he was shocked when Mr. Battle hired him.

"I did have an emotional moment because I thought back to being an Ailey camper," he said of learning the news in Mr. Battle's office. "I still have his handkerchief. He told me that he liked my dancing and that he had no idea that I was coming. There were no preconceived ideas or notions — I wasn't on the radar. I just came in and he said, 'Wow — O.K., I'll go with him.' I'm so glad he took the chance."

Clockwise from top left, Solomon Dumas of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. He danced leading roles in Rennie Harris's "Lazarus" and Ronald K. Brown's "The Call" this season. Mr. Dumas, below, with Jacqueline Green in the premiere of "The Call."



ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

