

THE AILEY/FORDHAM B.F.A. PROGRAM IN DANCE PREPARES STUDENT-DANCERS MIND, BODY AND SOUL FOR LIVES ON STAGE AND CAREERS AFTER DANCE.

Viivan Nixon stepped out of the classroom last spring and onto the Broadway stage in the musical *Hot Feet* to become one of the most talked-about young stars of the season. Clive Barnes, one of many reviewers to single out Nixon, wrote in his opening-night review in the *New York Post* of her exuberant performance and “sharp, exciting technique.” In her portrait of Kalimba, the driven dancer in this remaking of “The Red Shoes” to music by Earth, Wind and Fire, Nixon was sexy, classy and stylish, Barnes wrote, and the show’s “gleaming virtue.” She had also just graduated from the Ailey/Fordham B.F.A. Program in Dance, completing a full four years of a degree developed in partnership by Fordham University and the school of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Did Nixon’s recently developed interest in philosophy, specifically the philosophy of human nature taught in a favorite course at Fordham, help to deepen her performance? It would be hard to say, of course, but dance company directors and choreographers do look for a full-fledged, thoughtful adult beneath the surface of the dazzling technique required these days to become a professional dancer. And the Ailey/Fordham program, now in its eighth year, has become known for growing dancers with a nuanced sense of the world beyond the classroom.

Traditionally, dancers begin their training at an early age, starting in ballet as early as eight years old, eyes fixed on the studio-mirror image of themselves as they push for the perfection that may guarantee them a career. But choreographers have told Denise

Jefferson, the director of the Ailey School and the dance administrator of the Ailey/Fordham program, that they prefer dancers with the greater life experience that college can bring.

“It’s a very good program, but definitely a program for the strong-minded,” James A. Pierce III, a Philadelphia native who is a 2005 graduate of the program and now a principal dancer with Ballet Hispanico, said. “You have to have a tough skin. You start at 8:30 in the morning and go to 9 p.m., when classes are ending.” And there is more hard work ahead for academically and artistically strong dancers in their junior year, when they are allowed to apprentice with a company or join Ailey II, the second company of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, facing extra rehearsals while performing and touring.

Time is so short for dancers, who must make their mark by their early 20s and then frequently leave the stage by their late 30s. Why waste time in college, even when you can dance there?

Nixon chose Ailey/Fordham because she could have it all, she said: “good academics, good dancing and amazing dorms.” The California native also liked the idea that she could go to college “in the heart of the city, where there are so many options.” Once there, students often discover vital new interests to complement their passion for dancing. That was one of the goals of the program, along with helping to prepare dancers for productive careers after they leave the profession—whether because of age, injury or a declining interest in what is arguably the most demanding career in the performing arts.



*Pas de
Deux*

By Jennifer Dunning



photo by Eduardo Patino

Alexandria Love, a dancer from Miami who will be a junior this fall in the four-year program, fell in love with cultural anthropology at Fordham and plans to widen her sense of the parameters of dance by exploring the cultural traditions of Africa and Indonesia. Pierce found himself thinking in new ways about the world around him after studying sociology and European history at the University. Living in McMahon Hall on the Lincoln Center campus and sharing classrooms with non-dancers was “really cool” too, he said, a chance for once to be “a normal person” in the hothouse world of dance.

One key way to measure the success of the program is the number of graduating students who move on to jobs in dance. More than half—67 percent, to be exact—of the senior and graduating students go into professional companies. They have performed with the junior and senior troupes of companies including American Ballet Theater, the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, the Frankfurt Ballett, Philadanco and Urban Bush Women. Choreographers employing Ailey/Fordham graduates include Sean Curran, Larry Keigwin, Jennifer Muller, Elizabeth Streb, Elisa Monte, David Parsons and Shen Wei.

Graduates are performing in musicals on Broadway and on national and international tour. They have danced on television specials. Some have struck out on their own as independent choreographers, one of them making dances for Indian Bollywood films. Others work at organizations including *Dance Magazine* and the Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival, where French

Frederick Clements (FCLC ’03) now directs the publicity department. Twenty percent of graduating students go immediately into Ailey II. One now dances with the senior troupe. But the Ailey/Fordham B.F.A. was not designed, its administrators say emphatically, as a farm club for the Alvin Ailey companies.

Degree candidates are in effect full-time students at both institutions. A few have decided that dancing is not for them and switched to Fordham’s regular B.A. program or transferred to other colleges. “It’s usually people who decide they want something else during their first semester,” Jefferson said. “They get 14 to 17 dance classes a week and three academic classes. It’s intense.” As one departing student told her, “I like dance, but not *that* much.”

Ana Marie Forsythe, a co-director of the Ailey/Fordham program and head teacher of the Lester Horton technique of modern dance at Ailey, recalled another first-year student complaining that she had lost her sense of bliss. “You’re lucky you had one,” Forsythe responded teasingly.

But most seem to retain the joy of dancing as they recognize there is joy to be found in academic learning too. Love yearns to be chosen to perform with Ailey II this year, but she is just as intense when she speaks of selecting a possible minor in either anthropology or philosophy, which she became intrigued with after taking a course in ethics. “I can’t choose,” she exclaimed with the delight of a hungry person contemplating a banquet of exotic but nourishing dishes.



“The thing that amazes me about this program is that it’s attracting not only the artistic cream of the crop but also the intellectual cream of the crop.”

photo by Julieta Cervantes-Ladd

Bliss and joy were definitely not in the minds of Jefferson and Edward Bristow, Ph.D., a professor of history at Fordham and the academic administrator of the program, as they struck up a conversation waiting on the long, slow-moving line at the West 60th Street post office one day in 1994. Jefferson and Bristow, then dean of Fordham College at Lincoln Center, knew each other from having worked together to establish Fordham’s dance electives at the nearby Ailey School. “Ed, what about a B.A. in dance?” Jefferson asked Bristow, who had earlier helped to set up and administer a Fordham program that enabled New York City Ballet dancers to earn a B.A. during their limited hours away from rehearsals and performing.


At home later in the day, Jefferson had a revelation. A B.F.A. rather than a straight academic degree “would build on our strengths,” she suggested to Bristow, developing well-rounded dancers and enriching their professional lives. Jefferson and Bristow soon established a committee of staff members from both institutions, including the chair of Fordham’s successful theater department, as well as a consultant from the University of Hartford and a few friends. One of the friends was the late Morton Levy. An enthusiastic businessman and former Ailey board member, Levy had gone back to college late in life, graduating from Fordham in 1984, and was instrumental in pushing the program along. After two years, a curriculum and administrative plan were ready and were approved unanimously

by both institutions. It was time to let the rest of the world know.

Advertisements were placed in dance journals and auditions were conducted around the nation. To the surprise of Jefferson and Bristow, 250 dancers responded. “They came!” Forsythe said, laughing in recollection of how like anxious party-givers they had been. Today, there are 84 students enrolled in the Ailey/Fordham degree program, and the number of applicants grows each year.

What do the dancers study? Seventy-two percent of the minimum 144 credits they must earn are in dance, including classes in ballet, jazz and West African dance and several modern dance techniques, as well as partnering, performing skills and choreography. The classes are held at the gleaming new Ailey headquarters, the Joan Weill Center for Dance, on Ninth Avenue, five blocks south from Fordham’s Lincoln Center campus. All dancers must take ballet daily, with women required to have two years of dancing on point. The students’ academic courses include music for dancers and dance history. But they also include required and elective courses in English composition, foreign languages, art history, philosophy, sociology and history.

“Plato is required reading for all freshmen,” Robert Grimes, S.J., the dean of Fordham College at Lincoln Center, said, adding that the University’s undergraduate core curriculum was modified for the B.F.A. students. They take anatomy and kinesiology, for example, to complete two years of science requirements.



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Another non-requirement is mathematics, but that might change someday.

“We would like to come up with a geometry course for them,” Father Grimes said of the dancers. “It’s amazing how many students use their electives to take mathematics. One Ailey II student took calculus.” Father Grimes is also amazed, he said, that the program is “attracting not only the artistic cream of the crop but also the intellectual cream of the crop. We didn’t take into consideration that the students would be intellectually gifted enough to get scholarships. That has created a few budget problems!”

Entrance into the program is extremely competitive, with only 26 applicants accepted out of 400 for the newest class. Prospective students must submit applications to both institutions and are selected on the basis of their academic grades, SAT scores, interviews and a grueling daylong dance audition.

The Ailey/Fordham program and its students’ success might surprise anyone who believes that dancers think with their feet rather than their brains, a stereotype that has persisted despite all evidence to the contrary. “It is a prejudice that came because dancers are not thought of as verbal,” Father Grimes said. “But they are bright and disciplined.”

Jefferson suspects that the prejudice is based on the notion that, in ballet especially, dancers just do what they are told to do. “But they are asked to retain 30 to 40 ballets, improvise, take corrections and remember all these things,” she said.

The four administrators of the Ailey/Fordham program agree that dancers can actually be superior students because they know how to take direction, they are used to hard work and, unlike many college students, they already know what they want to do with their lives and are highly focused in achieving that goal.

“Some are very, very fine students, among the best we’ve taught at Fordham,” Bristow said. “They’re all fun to teach, because they’re serious about something.

They have something in their lives, which very few people do at that age. They work hard at it. And one respects them for having something wonderful in their lives. They stand out from their generation.”

The students’ college training also spills over to fellow dancers who are following the more traditional route to a career. Ailey students who are not in the program often complain about having to take work home. But the “BFAs,” as Jefferson calls them, are expected to do homework.

“They have to think about what the teachers say,” she said. “They ask questions—intelligent ones—in class. They work beyond the steps they are given.” By the program’s second year, she noticed that the mindset of

the degree candidates was beginning to affect the culture of the Ailey school.

Being around the Ailey/Fordham students has also been educational for the Fordham B.A. students, Bristow said. And Love agrees. She feels she may have helped to convince some of her non-dancing fellow college students, she said, that artists are not such outsiders after all. What convinced her to enroll in a program where she might initially feel like an outsider? Why Ailey/Fordham, in particular?

“I wanted the balance,” she said. “Knowledge and information from outside replenish the artist inside of you.”

At her audition, she recalled, Forsythe asked her what she thought she might bring to the program. “I said I would give the school my whole mind, that I would be here one-hundred percent,” Love said.

“I think this is one of the best dualities,” she added. “Ailey and Fordham. They are like two strong forces. Here, you have the best of both worlds.”

—Jennifer Dunning is a dance critic and reporter for The New York Times. She is the author of *Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance* (Addison-Wesley, 1996).



photo by Bruce Gilbert

Vivian Nixon (FCLC '06) graduated from the Ailey/Fordham program to a starring role on Broadway last spring.