

## Dance

# Jamar Roberts

## The Ailey Dancer Talks It Up

By Gia Kourlas



Photograph: Andrew Eccles

dresses. But it was effective. [Laughs]

### When did you start dancing?

When I was ten in Jacksonville, Florida. My family moved there for a short period of time after Hurricane Andrew in 1992. Everything in Miami was demolished, and that's when I started. There was a young lady that lived next door, and she needed guys to basically lift girls at an after-school dance program. I said, "Sure," because I lived right down the street. I just kept going. It was fun, and I really had nothing else to do after school. After we moved back to Miami—I'm an artist and I draw a lot—I think I was starting the sixth grade; I went to a magnet middle school and automatically, I just enrolled in art. One day the dance program had an assembly, and I was like, I've got to do that. It was so cheesy. They were dancing to that song "A Whole New World," from *Aladdin*, and there was smoke on stage, and they were wearing bedazzled

### What kind of dance was it?

It was a mix of everything: We did some ballet, jazz, a little bit of tap. I didn't do tap and I don't know why. We also did modern dance. I think I liked it all. I like to move in general, even now—look, I'm swiveling. It's not nerves. There wasn't one style in particular that caught my attention. That's just like it is at the Ailey company. We do so many different works, and I like them all. Most of the time. As long as I'm jumping, turning.

### What was your next period of training?

I bounced around. My parents are really crazy and unstable [Laughs]. After that first middle school, I went onto another in Miami, and after that there was high school. They wanted to open a high school that was your traditional high school with the football team and all that, but they also wanted to incorporate the arts. One of the teachers from my middle school went to teach at this new high school, and I basically followed the teacher into this school. Turns out, it wasn't at all what I wanted it to be. I think I wanted more of a conservatory feeling, and it was too normal-high-school. I transferred to New World School of the Arts in downtown Miami, and that's where I got a lot of formal training in Limón and Graham techniques and ballet. At the same time, I was dancing at a private dance studio outside of school, so I would spend hours and hours learning routines to take to competitions.

### What was your most memorable competition?

It was a competition called West Coast Dance Explosion. It was national. It was the most memorable because I was competing for the title of Mr. West Coast Dance Explosion. [Laughs] I just thought I was going to win, and I didn't. But I wasn't torn up about it or anything; I was only ever competing for fun. I never wanted an award or a medal. My teacher didn't emphasize it either. She was just there to show her work.

### Why did you think you were going to win?

I guess because other people said I was going to be the winner. Maybe because I was the tallest or something. [Laughs] Right after I graduated I went to the Ailey School and did their fellowship program for probably two weeks before I got

into Ailey II. I didn't even know there was an Ailey II before I went. My Graham teacher at high school—Peter London—is really good friends with Sylvia Waters, who runs the second company. He basically said, "I have a student here that you should take a look at." I think she saw me during classes for those two weeks.

### **Had you seen the Ailey company?**

I had seen them once before I got to the building. I was blown away, specifically by the "Sinner Man" section of *Revelations*. It was funny because Matthew Rushing was doing the third variation, which is something that he wouldn't do onstage in a regular season now. I was blown away by that performance. It seemed really far-fetched and unattainable, but at the same time it seemed really familiar to me. I think they danced in a way or with an energy that seemed very close to my own. But at the time, I didn't see myself dancing there at all. I mean, sure, I said, "I want to dance there" after I left the performance, but you know—sometimes you just say things.

### **Did you have a dream to move to New York?**

No. I didn't want to move to New York. Actually, I didn't even want to be a dancer until I graduated. I wanted to be a meteorologist at one point. At another, I wanted to be a fashion designer. I always say I didn't want to be a dancer until three years ago. [Laughs] I think it takes a lot to figure that out. For some, maybe, it's love at first sight. But I'm a late bloomer for a lot of things. What I think it took was just some growing up and realizing what you're actually getting into and why you're doing it. At a point, the idea of dancing just for fun kind of plays out a little bit after you do it constantly. You have to find another reason, or one comes up.

### **What's the reason?**

My reason is it's just a part of who I am [Laughs]. I've just accepted the fact. Not that I won't do anything else as well as dance, but I'll always dance, and I dance because I feel that it's a gift. You know when, say, a friend gives you a ring or some earrings, and they ask, "Do you ever wear that? I've never seen you wear that." I feel a responsibility, in a way, to do it, no matter how much I hate it. It's a beautiful gift. Not everyone can dance.

### **How long were you in Ailey II?**

Just a year.

### **And then you were in Ailey—but you were also in Complexions, right? What happened?**

I left the Ailey company after two years because I had to go and figure out this fashion-design thing. [Laughs] While I was in the company, I was doing sketches, and I would sometimes build a costume here and there, but I couldn't do that—I'm kind of black-and-white, all-or-nothing sometimes, and I couldn't do it halfway. I had to go and figure it out and see if it was real. Was this a hobby or just a passion of mine? It just turned out to be a hobby. [Laughs]

### **Did you go to design school?**

I went to FIT just for a semester. It took just that long for me to figure out I didn't want to. It's just a little too tedious for me. Kind of boring. Stationary. And yes, I only did a semester, but there are a lot of rules involved. I've made things in the past, and I just like to rig it up, and if it stays and doesn't fall apart, then I'm fine. But the draping and all that other stuff... [Moans] And at the same time I was dancing in Complexions, because I needed to make money when I was in school, so I started doing them both. I would leave rehearsal and go to class and basically fall asleep, so dance kind of took over, anyway.

### **Was that a hard transition going from Ailey II to the main company?**

I think during Ailey II, I called a friend of mine every single day basically saying, "I want to leave." [Laughs] Ailey II is not easy. I actually think it's more difficult than the first company in a lot of ways. You don't get all the perks, so it makes it a little bit more trying. The hotels aren't five-star either, and sometimes you're dancing on a makeshift stage. Things like that.

### **Was it better after you joined the company?**

It was better, but at the same time I was doing my designs. I still had this itch. I got in when I was 18. When you're that young, you're crazy—you have no idea who you are or what you want. Before I left, I did a piece by Ohad [Naharin]: *Black Milk*. I didn't know who Ohad was before I did the piece, but I did by the time I finished because he was absolutely amazing, and I was just so honored to have done that. I don't know if I'd ever get to do that again. It was probably a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The piece came and left so quickly.

**It's a shame, because it looked good on the company.**

It felt good. I liked his whole style of movement and I liked the approach. It's not from a dancer standpoint; it's more human. And dancers, we tend to not be human at times. [Laughs] Or at least think that we're not. I think it's a really modest work.

**Was there an open door for you to return?**

I didn't think there was—not that I felt I had burned any bridges at all.

**You're funny! I always imagined you to be like some god—that everything is perfect for you.**

Oh, *no*. I have moments.

**I had no idea that you have had misgivings. Well, you look quite amazing on stage. In control.**

Cool. I completely enjoy what I do, but it's a journey figuring out where you are, what you want to say, how you want to say it. What everything means. It's not that everything has to mean anything—and I totally have friends saying that to me all the time—but on a certain level, it does. You can't just be out there flying around. So anyway, I didn't think there would be an open door, and I didn't think I would want to come back again, either. [Laughs] But I wanted to dance. In retrospect, it was kind of a silly move. Of course you're going to want to dance again. You're 19 years old and you're going to try to stop moving? That's crazy. I didn't think there was an open door, but I called, and [artistic director Judith Jamison] was glad to have me back, and I've *been* glad to come back.

**What have you worked on that's been special?**

[Sighs] I haven't worked on anything. You mean self-work or repertorywise?

**I was referring to repertory, but both?**

Well, myself, I don't feel like I've worked on anything. Here at Ailey, I feel like as long as you do the actual work—the repertory—then that work that you feel you need to do on yourself in order to be a better dancer comes. They're synonymous in that way. I think the job is very demanding. It demands that you go to bed early or do a certain amount of cardio in order to get through a role, and once you do get through it, you've learned something from that. They're kind of one and the same.

**What rep do you enjoy?**

In the current rep, I really like *In/Side*, by Robert Battle. I can't even express how terrified I was to learn the solo after having seen it, and then to perform it was like another level of fear. I'm used to it and it's become one of my favorite things to do, but it's grueling and it's dramatic and it's dark and it's dizzying—but it's all the things I love about dance. Like, I love it when it's dramatic, and I love it when it's dark and when it's intense. I wish there were more pieces that force you to go as deep into yourself.

**So you're a Robert Battle fan?**

Am I a Robert Battle fan? [Pauses] I would say... [Pauses again and laughs] It's hard for me to think of his work and not think of doing it. Because doing it is different from seeing it.

**I'm sure that's true.**

Doing it is a little torturous. But I'm a fan. I think he's very original and I think he's really smart, and I think that's really important. Yeah.

**What about the works of Ailey?**

I love *Night Creature*. I think it's perfect, from costumes to lighting to the music. The little comic relief. I think it's a really charming piece and I've always loved doing it. When you first get into the company, that's one of the things they teach you, aside from *Revelations*. So I started off as one of the guys in the back, waving the arms, and then I moved up to doing one of the lead guys. I kind of wish I was back there waving my arms again, because the corps guys do more than the lead guys do in this piece. *Masekela Language*, we did at BAM. I love that one. And *Revelations*, of course. I really like doing it.

**And I really like watching it, honestly. It's structurally impeccable.**

There are some times when I'm not performing it, and I'll watch just from the wing, and I'm just like, Wow—how did you think of that? “Sinner Man” in particular. When I dance it, I feel like I'm running three times: I come out and run on

the diagonal, and then later on I do a run upstage and then downstage—but when I look at the piece, the whole thing is running! It's a rush. I think he chose some really interesting patterns that work. I like doing the Father Figure in “Buked” because it feels like a warm-up—it kind of puts you in the mood. There's a moment where the curtain is down and the music plays for a couple of seconds and just that little bit of hearing that music is really comforting. You could have done the most strenuous piece before *Revelations*, but it always seems like at that moment, everything you've done before has been washed away. It's rejuvenating.

**How do you keep your individuality in such an institution? Or do you not think of it that way?**

Most of the dancers are artists, and you want to be an individual. I think that's your whole reason for doing art—so you can express yourself, who you are. I don't think of that. I think I'm in the position I'm in because I am who I am. I'm different already. I don't think about trying so much.

**But you don't feel the trappings of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater?**

I do. [*Whispers*] It's a touchy subject. I speak about it all the time.

**Just not to someone like me!**

I try to do a lot of work on my own outside of the company or in the back of the studio, so that I don't feel so...conforming. If there's a choreographic opportunity where I feel I want to do something, I'll do that. My movement is completely different from what I do onstage. That always helps me feel like myself.

**How much longer do you think you'll stay?**

I'm in my eighth year. I was going to try to make it to ten years, but we'll see. I think I'm a really curious person, and I think I have a lot to say. I haven't really figured out how I want to say it and if I want to say it here or someplace else.

**What do you think of Robert Battle taking over the company?**

Mmmmm. I don't know what to think. I think it's great.

**You do?**

I only say I don't know because I don't know what he has planned. I know that this company is very different from Battleworks, and it has a different agenda, period. Just in the size. That's why I don't know. But overall, I guess I have a more positive feeling about it than negative. I think the company is in need of a change, and I like change. I like new.