

MANHATTAN FAMILY

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Leaping into the limelight

Dancer leaps onto world stage with help from family, teachers

BY TAMMY SCILEPPI

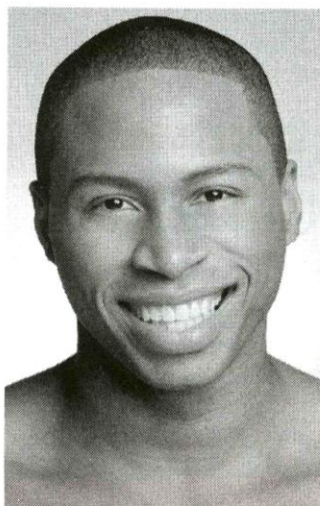
There are many smart young people in our communities with promising futures. But every now and then, a resilient, gifted artist comes along who rises above and beyond — despite numerous hurdles. What sets them apart from the rest?

In the case of a special, 22-year-old man from Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, it was a strong belief in his own abilities, a drive to succeed, a positive attitude, and encouragement from his family and mentors that enabled him to realize his life-long dream of becoming a great dancer. Jeroboam Bozeman was recently welcomed into the prestigious dance company Ailey II, and made his New York debut with that company in March.

"My first year with the company has been amazing; this experience has been a dream come true," says Bozeman, who danced with Creative Outlet Dance Theatre of Brooklyn, Philadanco, and Spectrum Dance Theatre before joining Ailey II. "I've always dreamed of being a part of the Ailey organization, and I often pinch myself to see if it's real."

This season, he shows off his physical prowess and finesse in several lead roles demanding different personas. In "The External Knot" — a soulful, modern work by Troy Powell, Ailey II's recently appointed artistic director — Bozeman describes his character as "a lonely guy, trying to find his way ... searching for love and yearning for attention, but often finding himself alone."

Powell feels Bozeman is an asset to the company and brings depth



Brooklyn-born dancer Jeroboam Bozeman calls his mother his inspiration.

to its performances.

"It has been an honor to work with Jeroboam Bozeman over the past year," says Powell. "When I hired him, he immediately embodied the spirit and energy of a young professional dancer. He has taken this experience and used it to help him grow as an artist. Not only does he have an incredible work ethic, he's also very intelligent and grabs the attention of every audience he performs for. He's a great asset to the Ailey II family."

In everything he does, Bozeman never forgets his guiding lights.

"My mother is my inspiration. She raised seven children in Brooklyn and didn't lose one of us to the streets...that's commendable," says Bozeman. "She never came to a performance until my last season with Philadanco, and it was a very

emotional experience for me. She gave me a hug and said, 'I'm very proud of you. You are anointed with a gift from God. Continue to push, baby, this is only the beginning!' Those words filled my heart and I hold onto them."

Growing up

Bozeman's childhood honed skills he needed to navigate the competitive dance world, and his mentor gave him the courage to try.

"My home was always busy. Whether there were arguments about video games, or who watched television first, or the bathroom ... it was intense and very competitive."

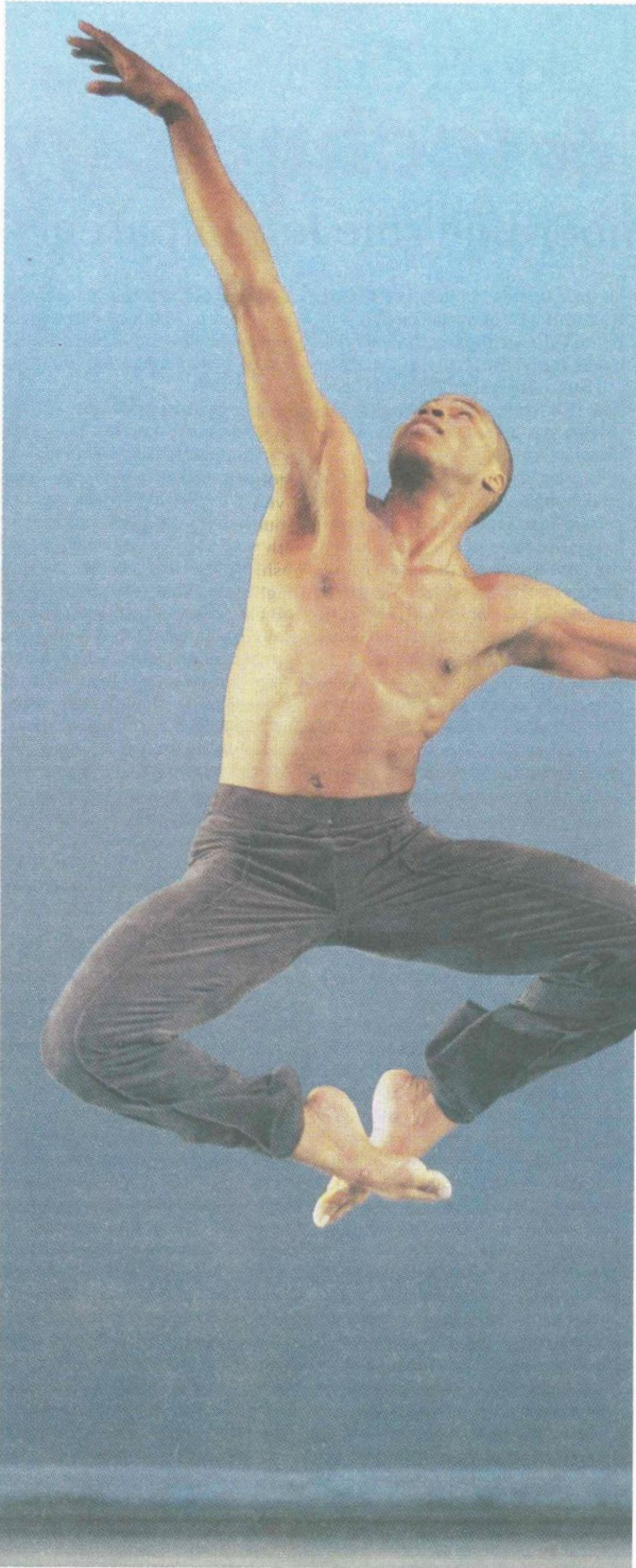
A quiet child who always had good grades, he says he was often teased at his elementary school, PS 44 in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Later, at JHS 113, he joined the cheer-leading squad, "where I fell in love with dance under the instruction of Ruth Sistaire, an amazing teacher."

Middle school is difficult for many children, and it wasn't any easier for Bozeman. He recalls trying to fit in and find himself as a dancer, but says he always felt like an outcast, because he was awkward and didn't talk much.

"I remember when I didn't want to dance, because I was tired of being teased and picked on — the boys called me names and the girls made fun of me," recalled Bozeman. "But Ms. Sistaire was like a mother to me. She was so embracing and understanding."

And luckily, his sister was supportive, too.

"She would just talk to me. It was the best feeling ... I could be myself around her. She was an



Eduardo Pinino

amazing support system for me — always encouraged me to follow my dreams, regardless of what anyone said, and told me I was destined for greatness. She taught me to ignore what people had to say and remain focused on my goals — to achieve them.”

After attending the Joffrey Ballet and Dance Theatre of Harlem summer program on a full scholarship at age 15, Bozeman says he was intimidated by all the dancers and their beautiful bodies.

“I was caught up with all the things I didn’t have, so I stopped dancing, because I thought I would never be as good as they were.”

Getting out

Later, Bozeman did find the courage to dance again.

“I didn’t come from a privileged background, and people I

attended school with got involved with drugs, gangs, or became incarcerated. I knew I didn’t want to be like that, that I deserved better,” said Bozeman. “I knew that dance was my way out.”

And get out he did.

“I moved out of Brooklyn at 19 and thought I would never move back. It was sometimes scary growing up there. When it got dark out, we had to come inside and parents were afraid of losing their children to the streets.”

Bozeman says the gang violence and crime rate was probably at its highest then.

“There were a lot of killings and robberies, and there was a time when you could get into a fight or killed if you had on the wrong color; it was intense.

“People I knew and attended school with were vanishing — they were either in jail or passed away at a young age. There were a few that made it out of Brooklyn,” says Bozeman, adding, “Brooklyn is a lot cleaner and safer now, and looking back at how much the environment has changed, it’s impressive.”

Recently moving back to New York City from Philadelphia, Bozeman says he loves “what the neigh-

borhood has shifted to — it’s diverse and well-rounded. The energy of the community seems to be a lot calmer.”

On the road

Telling a story with ethereal movement and lush partnering, “Rusty,” a contemporary piece by Paris-born choreographer Benoit-Swan Pouffer, seems to echo Bozeman’s own life as a budding dancer, for it explores the experiences of young artists — the challenges they face and the relationships they build as performers.

“In this ballet, I think of my character as the too-cool-for-school kind of guy,” Bozeman explains. “He meets a girl he likes, and she makes him all gooey inside, but he doesn’t want anyone to know...so he can keep his image.”

Bozeman also performed in Judith Jamison’s “Divining.” A choreographer for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, her striking, pulsating modern dance work builds on African dance idioms and is set to a score of North African, Central African, and Latin rhythms. Bozeman played a tribe leader guiding his people to a new destination.

He travels frequently with Ailey II — the company recently toured France for about four weeks.

“It was amazing, and this time I studied the language,” says Bozeman. “It’s always refreshing to realize how much dance is a universal language.”

“Dancers are often perfectionists, we always want to execute everything correctly. Working with Mr. Powell has taught me that life isn’t about being perfect,” says Bozeman. “We don’t always have great performances, but if you go out there and you’re honest, that’s what the audience appreciates most.”

The up-and-coming dancer says he never had the opportunity to work with Alvin Ailey himself, but says Powell often shares stories from his time as a dancer with the company, and would describe the famous choreographer’s vision.

“It was all about giving back, and that speaks volumes to me,” says Bozeman. “As an artist, we have to remember that art is not all about ourselves, but the ability to share and give back.”