

IS IT IN THE WATER? An intimate conversation with Bed-Stuy's own Jeroboam Bozeman of Alvin Ailey Dance Theater

By: Michael Milton
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'The Art of Seeing' by Michael Milton

Jeroboam Bozeman and I both agree that there simply **MUST** be something in Brooklyn's water system to account for the historic outpouring of talent from our city— from Aaron Copland to Busta Rhymes; Walt Whitman to Jean Michel Basquiat; oh yeah, and 'lesser-known' luminaries like Carl Sagan, Arthur Miller, Beverly Sills AND Barbra Streisand, Michael Jordan, Mike Tyson, Pat Benetar, Barry Manilow and hundreds more Nobel/ Pulitzer/ Oscar award winning artists, all Brooklyn natives.

And now Bed-Stuy resident Mr. Bozeman. OK. Probably the H₂O has nothing to do with it. Perhaps simply living in Manhattan's shadow—literally and figuratively—could have helped nurture and make almost iconic the sort of 'scrappiness' we have come to recognize through art as simply "Brooklyn-esque."

Fast-rising lead dancer and choreographer Jeroboam Bozeman says, "When I know someone is from Brooklyn I just figure that **WHATEVER** their game is, they are in it 100%. I love the history of Brooklyn. I love that so many fighters come from here...in all fields."

Bozeman, born and raised in Brooklyn, is a glowing example of the kind of 'Brooklyn-nese' energy we were both referring to. And fueled by that energy, Jeroboam find himself now on the precipice of dance stardom at the Alvin Ailey Company.

Pronouncing 'Jeroboam' is fun; 'jeh-ruh-boh-uhm' with the emphasis on the third syllable. Biblical, of course. 'He who pleads the people's cause.' And expressing his message of love and unity through dance is, Jeroboam feels, a most pressing cause.

"Dancing wasn't something smiled upon when I was a kid," says 25 year old Bozeman. "If I'd asked my folks for karate lessons, it would have been no problem. But ballet slippers? They weren't so into that. The question for them was, I suppose, how will I make a living dancing? They were just looking out for me."

And how wonderful Jeroboam has gotten to answer that question for his folks so early in his career.

Jeroboam practically hums with energy; granted; in fact, he's been humming all day. I have caught him for an hour in the midst of his almost impossible-to-conceive of weekly schedule. "If you love it, all you want to do is...IT. My IT is dance. Sure I'm tired by Sunday. And I stay in bed for most of the day. But I always want to get back here."

We discuss the nature of adversity in helping an artist discover their 'vision', the **REASON** to create.

"This is silly but, like, I wanted to play Double Dutch in elementary school...and **NOT** play football. That sounds sort of stereotypical, when you are an adult. But as a kid, you don't know that. You just think there can't possibly be **ANYONE** else like you," he said. "I only knew it felt lonely."



Jeroboam confesses that he went ‘mute’ for several years around that time. “A poetic kind of mute-ness,” he explains. “What was the point in talking, if no one understood me? But in retrospect, isolation gave me lots of time to think about who I really was. I was able to make bold choices when I was young. I KNEW what I wanted!”

What about the effect of fame on the creative process... on a career, I ask? Bozeman leans forward. “I don’t do this for fame, and even as I say that, I know how corny that sounds. What I mean is, fame always has to be the result of, not the reason for what I do. Look, for a dancer time is fleeting.”

He continues, “For me ‘fame’ gives me visibility and the possibility of imagining for myself a lifelong career—as a dancer and hopefully later as a choreographer. My idols here at Ailey have earned a living and made wonderful lives for themselves with dance at the center.”

Jeroboam recently returned from a tour in South Africa. “There is so much for Americans to learn from South Africa. Mandela always encouraged his people to continue moving forward; a terrible past is to be learned from but not wallowed in,” he said. “Everyone I met in South Africa seemed eager to move on to the next and hopefully more embracing horizon of their history.”

“I am not the greatest technical dancer,” Jeroboam says somewhat modestly. And I’d tend to disagree. “But what I do—be it dance or just living my day to day life—I do it with love, with all my heart. For me, love is what is most important; it is what heals. Why not strive for a soulful earthly union in our own lifetimes?”

An ambitious program, to be sure.

Still, spiritual reunification must— at some level— be the purview of all art. As the world spins precariously forward, creating love is an imperative. And rest assured, dancer Jeroboam Bozeman at The Alvin Ailey Co. fully embraces that imperative in his work.

(Alvin Ailey’s opening night for their 2015-16 season is Dec. 2nd at New York City Center. Please check online for all of their NY dates through Jan. 3.)

