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DANCE *Studio* LIFE

November 2007 | Volume 12 Issue 8



MAKING ALVIN PROUD

At AileyCamp, dance is a means to a greater goal

By Cheryl Ossola

As the house lights dim at Zellerbach Hall, on the University of California's Berkeley campus, two nervous girls stand in a spotlight reciting poems they have written during the six weeks of AileyCamp. Then the curtain rises on a program of dance and spoken word that is endearing and invigorating in its earnestness. The energy-filled performance may lack polish and brilliant technique, but that's just as it should be. At AileyCamp, dance is a tool that's used to achieve a much bigger mission.

AileyCampers learn a lot about dance, but they also learn about life, and people, and how to function in society. The single biggest lesson these young people walk away with is not how to do a plié, how a dance is put together, or how to memorize steps. It's discovering, every day and in various contexts, that they have choices—about who they are and what they will do with their lives, and how art can help them figure out both of those things. In every class, whether it's learning a jazz combination,

experimenting with slam poetry, discussing social and racial tensions, or writing in a journal, these kids learn that self-expression comes in many forms.

Talk to anyone affiliated with AileyCamp and you will find yourself on the receiving end of an impassioned explanation of what makes this program so valuable. Alvin Ailey, founder/director of New York City-based Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT), left a legacy of giving back to the community when he died in 1989. His commitment to young people is the driving force behind the camp, and one can only assume that he would have loved what his successors have achieved. "Mr. Ailey was generous and he was accessible, and those are two words that are everywhere within the Ailey organization," says AileyCamp national director Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, a former Ailey dancer. "It's important for young people to know that they can do something. It is a gift to be able to get up and walk. It is a gift to have this instrument that you can use."

Photo courtesy Cal Performances

'These kids are at an age where they can discover the kinds of choices that will show them the road to success. AileyCamp does that, and that's why I'm involved with it.'

—AileyCamp teacher M'bewe Escobar

AileyCamp began in 1991 in New York City and now has eight other sites: Berkeley; Boston; Bridgeport, CT; Chicago; Kansas City, MO and KS; and (new this year) Atlanta and Staten Island. Hosting organizations, not the Ailey Foundation, are responsible for funding and running their camps. For the campers, everything is free: two meals a day, camp T-shirts and shorts, dancewear and shoes, field trips, and bus transportation. The Berkeley location, officially called the Oakland/Berkeley AileyCamp at Cal Performances, is hosted and administered by Cal Performances on the UC–Berkeley campus. According to Cal Performances' director of public relations, Christina Kellogg, the organization raises approximately \$250,000 each year to fund the camp, which started in 2002 with a three-year grant from the Hewlett Foundation.

All eligible sites share a common denominator: a history of hosting AAADT or its second company, Ailey II. That allows the program to extend beyond the six weeks of classes to include reunions, at which the campers and their families can see the company perform and take master classes with company members. That connection to the Ailey legacy "is an important part of the process," says Thomas-Schmitt.

Nationally, the camps serve approximately 650 middle schoolers, most of whom have had little or no experience with dance. (Although the camp is not a preprofessional training program, the Ailey Foundation tries to arrange scholarships with local dance programs so that talented students can continue their training.) According to the Berkeley camp's director, David McCauley (also a former Ailey dancer), middle school is the perfect time to reach these students. "It's a difficult age and it's the best age," he says. "They can make decisions; they are still receptive to change; and they know how to enjoy themselves. It's an excellent time."

The campers are recruited through presentations at schools in areas where most children have few opportunities to experience the arts. Applicants are interviewed, says Thomas-Schmitt, "so that the director has a better understanding of who this child is, what challenges they might face, how they view themselves, what their family situation is. So everyone has an idea of what they're getting into. The campers sign a commitment contract, because it's one thing for parents to say, 'I want my child to come here,' and another for the child to say, 'I commit to coming for six weeks, to having my attire here every day, and to participating.' And when there are problems, the director

can say, 'Look at what you signed. It says all this, and it's not happening. What do you think we should do?'"

Though the camp rules are strict—hair is pulled back; big jewelry, gum chewing, candy, and soft drinks are banned; and there's zero tolerance for violence—the results "are great," says Thomas-Schmitt, and parents are enthusiastic. "The program helps to develop well-rounded young adults. And that is something every parent wants." But, she adds, "the kids must have the desire to accom-



Opposite: AileyCampers feel the power of dance in a rehearsal with teacher M'bewe Escobar. Above: Campers Kenya Jelks (left) and Te'Ana Bailey.

plish these things; they have to embody it for themselves. I always say, 'It's not about making the right or wrong decision. It's about making the best choice for *you* at this particular moment.' That's something they can understand."

Not all of the campers arrive feeling certain that this is the place for them—like 12-year-old Oscar Urquiza. "I wanted to go to a sports camp, but my mom said, 'Why don't you give it a shot for a week?' So I came, and I like it more than sports," he says. "They cheer you up and tell you not to give up, and if you want to give up they'll keep on encouraging you. I'm thinking of being a volunteer next year." *(continued on page 49)*



(continued from page 47)

Empowerment is a key concept at AileyCamp. "A lot of these kids don't have a family structure or support for their goals and dreams," says Thomas-Schmitt. "We talk about goal setting and the possibility of reaching these goals. Say you tell two kids to write a one-page summary [of a book]. One brings in a typed page and the other brings in a handwritten paper and says, 'I don't have a computer at home.' I'd say, 'Well, there are computers at school. You could type it there. You're going to be applying to college in a couple of years, and they'll look at a typed application much quicker than a handwritten one—they'll throw that in the garbage.' It's all about production and presentation. All of these things are part of what goes into AileyCamp from the first day."

McCauley tells the kids that what they are learning translates into life outside of camp. "I say, 'Who wants to be a singer? A writer? This is what you're going to go through no matter what you plan to do. You're going to come in thinking you know a lot, and you're going to find out that you don't. You have to be willing to accept that and then take your instruction and keep adding onto it. You'll get there, but it's going to take the same discipline that we're asking of you here.'"

Camper Kenya Jelks, 12, is a good example of empowerment in action. She gushes about how much fun the

Top: Ballet teacher Willie Anderson works with Selena Ramirez and Gerardo Torres on their group's performance piece. Right: AileyCampers in ballet class.

campers have, how much she loves African dance, and how much harder ballet is than she imagined. "Willie [Anderson, the ballet teacher] said, 'It's not easy, but you have to try.' He gave me courage, so I tried; if I didn't get it, I tried again." When asked to name something important she has learned, she grows serious. "They taught me that if I want something I have to go for it, and I shouldn't give up on myself. If you keep on trying, there is a way to get through things that you thought were hard, and they will no longer be hard."

In Berkeley the campers start their day with breakfast, then gather onstage for affirmations, led by McCauley. "One of them is to not say, 'I can't.' If you say, 'I can't,' then you can't do it. If you say, 'I don't know how,' you can always learn," he says. The roughly 75 students then divide up into four groups (each one monitored by a college-age group leader) and rotate through their classes: Horton-based modern dance, ballet, African, jazz dance, performance techniques, personal development, and creative communications. Fridays are reserved for field trips, like sailing on San Francisco Bay.

On a Monday in June during the camp's third week, the walls in Shawn Nealy's personal development classroom are lined with statistics: "One child dies every three hours from gunfire." "Of the 15,000 hours of TV kids watch, they will see 180,000 murders, rapes, robberies, etc." On a positive note, posters about self-esteem, integrity, and classroom expectations abound. That day's assignment is to write down three things that affected the campers'

