

## ***An Interview with Professor/Dancer Andre Tyson***

***By: Yvonne Jones Houston***

Associate Professor **Andre Tyson**, who teaches Modern technique (Horton and Graham), Pilates method, jazz, floor barre a terre and Introduction to Dance for Men at The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, also teaches and choreographs nationally and internationally.

Mr. Tyson studied theater with the Inner City Ensemble Children's Theater and Dance Company, ballet at the School of Garden State Ballet and was a scholarship student at the Martha Graham School and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center. Andre has appeared with the Inner City Ensemble, Alfred Gallman's Newark Dance Theatre, Alvin Ailey American Dance Center Workshop/ Ailey III and the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble/ Ailey II. Andre Tyson has choreographed works for several companies and was an Assistant Choreographer for Mr. Talley Beaty. He was also Principal Dancer and Company Teacher with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for 9 years.

**Yvonne Jones Houston** is an Assistant Professor of dance in the Department of Fine Arts at Barry University. Ms. Houston holds a B.F.A in dance from New York University and a M.A in Dance Education from Columbia University. Ms. Houston performs and teaches nationally and internationally making television and radio appearances. In New York she performed with Linda Tarnay and in Jamaica she danced with the National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica. Ms. Houston is the Artistic Director of the Barry University Repertory Dance Ensemble and performs locally and nationally with Diaspora Dance Inc.

Interview:

Y: When and where did you begin your dance training?

T: I started dancing at the age of 16 but started formal training at the age of 20.

Y: Why did you start dancing?

T: I had a summer job as a photographer and I was assigned to photograph of a theater and dance group Paterson New Jersey's Inner City Ensemble Children's Theater and Dance Company. I had a crush on one of the members and auditioned to try to get to know her better. They liked me and took me into the company, I interned began to like dance. I ended up working with them for two years but nothing ever became of my crush except she and I became very good friends.

First we did theater movement but I gravitated more toward the dance portion of the company. I went to the School of the Garden State Ballet Newark Jersey. Garden State Ballet also had a Modern Dance Company component as part of their training. I studied modern with Alfred Gallman, who later formed his own company in New Jersey, called Alfred Gallmans' Newark Dance Theater. In 1979 I received a scholarship at the Alvin

Ailey American Dance Center and was asked by company director Kelvin Rotardier to become a member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center Workshop Company (Ailey III) that same year. After a year with the AAADC Workshop Company I was invited by Sylvia Waters the director of the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble (Ailey II) to perform with that company. After two years with Ailey II and several attempts I was denied entry into the main company the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. I left Ailey II and went on to do other things like teach and dance with smaller companies in the New York area. I got a call from Alvin Ailey about three months after leaving Ailey II and he asked me if I would dance in his company. I could not believe it. I thought it was a crank call and that someone playing a joke on me. It was Alvin alright and he said I had been on his mind for a while and wanted me to join the company.

Y: How was it dancing with the first company?

T: When I first started I felt bad, because I was always alone with a video tape or with one person learning choreography in a studio. Those days they used the seniority system and I was new so it was expected that you would wait and have to earn the right to do lead roles in the company. The first lead role I learned "Fix Me Jesus" from "Revelations"

Y: Which Ailey pieces did you dance?

T: Revelations as a corps dancer, "Fix me Jesus" with Renee Robinson, "I've Been Boked" - the center guy, and "I Want to be Ready" along with "Sinner Man", "Night Creature" "Blues Suite", "Masekala Language", "Memoria", "Hidden Rites", "Landscape", "Opus McShan", and several other company pieces by Alvin.

Y: Which solo pieces?

T: "Hermit Songs" (solo about a monk) and "Love Songs" one of the hardest dances I ever had to do as well as "Bad Blood" by Ulysses Dove.

Y: Why did you leave Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater?

T: I left for two main reasons, my mom became ill with advanced alzheimers, and I found out I was H.I.V. positive. I had seen to many friends in the organization dance and work themselves into a grave. I didn't want that for myself. I wanted to take control of my life, and use my time to do what I really wanted to do and that was to spend time with my family. I also wanted to write, spend more time with my partner and do special projects.

Y: What other projects have you accomplished outside the Ailey Company, which is in itself a great accomplishment?

T: I have taught and choreographed throughout this country an in such places Australia, Brazil, Germany, Italy, Holland and Japan. I studied Japanese and French languages. I worked briefly with Complexions Dance Company and became a tenured faculty member at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Dance Department.

Y: I understand you have had the great fortune to work with Talley Beatty what was that

like?

T: Yes, I worked as his assistant; I re-staged “Celebration”, “Congo Tango Palace” and the “Stack-up”. I also re-staged his “Road of the Phoebe Snow”. Many people say he was strict and mean, but he was just from the “old school” way of thinking. He would not tolerate not dancing full out all the time. He wanted dancers to be very passionate about their art and dance with conviction and purpose.

The “old school” dancers had it much harder than my generation. The dancers now don’t completely understand what it was like to be denied access to class, auditions or certain roles, or companies. When I assisted Talley I served as the go between with the dancers and him. I would explain to the dancers why he was so upset and why they had to dance full out. We had a great professional relationship. He was a sweet man with high standards. I later found out he may have taken to me because I looked a lot like him when he was young and maybe I reminded him of himself when he was my age. That was a huge compliment to me.

Y: What led you to academia?

T: I worked with North Carolina School of the Arts, but in 1998, Michael Thomas a friend and former Ailey company alumni recommended me to Professor Marcia Parsons Dance Department/Chair at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She was extremely nice and encouraged me to come teach there. I started as a Lecturer/Assistant Professor and last year I received tenure and I am an Associate Professor now.

Y: How hard was the transition from performer to Academia?

T: Not too bad because of my teaching experience at North Carolina School for the Arts, Smith College and Wake Forest University where I had administrative and advising duties to do along with teaching and choreographing. The biggest difference is from Studio to University teaching. In the studio you treat the dancers more as adults and you can demand more from them. Dancing in a studio metropolitan environment makes you more passionately proactive about your craft. In a University setting dance isn’t as competitive. Finding a different way to reach them is key. Trying to get them to acquire and maintain that “do or die” passion for making it as a dance artist is most challenging.

Y: What styles of dance do you teach, what is your teaching philosophy?

T: I teach Modern/Contemporary, Jazz, Pilates, Partnering, and Floor Barre a Terre. I come from the generation where you learn all forms of dance. I believe you must be cross-trained, so the body is trained to do whatever the opportunity demands. These days you never know where you will end up. Ballet dancers end up on Broadway and modern dancers find themselves doing classical work or in music videos or in television. You must be able to do it all and back hand spring as well if you want to work.

Y: What level dancer do you enjoy working with the most, the beginning dancer or the proficiency of the seasoned dancer?

T: I enjoy the proficiency and maturity of the seasoned dancer because they are able to

color the work in class as well as add something special to choreography. They have the ability when they get on stage to adapt and use what you give them as a “construct” and then go beyond that. When you have to get on stage seven nights a week you have to find a new way of making the material exciting and fresh. If you are a serious dancer you will be serious about your work. You can be serious about work but you must know when to let it go. As a dancer you are searching for perfection. Trying to teach someone to push themselves every day or color movement if they are not already working toward that isn't as interesting to me. I want students to be technically strong, expressive, self motivated individuals. I don't want my students to dance like Andre Tyson, or anybody, I just want them to develop their own passion and how to control and manipulate their talents and abilities then express themselves fully and with passion, humility, honesty and integrity.

Y: Who is your mentor, who inspires you to choreograph?

T: I tell my students that their parents should be their mentors, not me. I will teach you but your mentors come from your home, neighborhood or work place. Real mentor/role models are good people around you who live with decency and character that show you how to live with dignity and humanity. I always say don't look outside for someone to be like, strive to be your best on your own. I know I have been influenced by Alvin Ailey and Talley Beatty and dozens of other Master Choreographers and teachers from Ulysses Dove, Walter Raines, Elisa Monte and Donald Bird to William Forsythe, Jiri Kylian, Denis Jefferson, Milton Myers and Judith Jamison most of whom I've had the pleasure of working with. They were gracious and generous but I do not have one mentor per se.

Y: Do you still dance? What made you leave Complexions?

T: Yes & No. I will dance in special projects with people I want to work with only but mostly I don't dance anymore. I really don't miss performing because in order to perform at a high level I have to take at least two classes per day and stay in top form and I don't have the drive or time to do that anymore. If something special comes up or a friend asked me to dance I will. Complexions was started as a pick-up company ( special performances, something to do between main appearances in the Ailey Company) I did a few gigs with them but teaching full time got in the way of performing. Dwight and I have talked about me coming back to dance again but the timing has not been right, plus he and Desmond are just crazy busy.

Y: What is your future plan as an Artist?

T: I would like to be in a position where I can do some other things, I have many interests. I would like to study sound design and film. I enjoy working with my hands and my mind and I enjoy writing and journalism.

Somewhere in me there is an Epic novel, a screen play, a children's book and I would like to get to that place were I can sit down, stop moving and accomplish all of these things.

Y: Thank you for this interview you are an inspiration to dancers who continue to do what they love the most.

