



AYD, Alvin Ailey Masterclass. Photo: Pierre Tappon Photography



Going the extra mile

Artistic Director of Artistry Youth Dance, **Kamara Gray** has been on a global journey. Here, she reflects on a path that led her from the Antipodes to London ending in a recent close encounter between the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and her company which demonstrates the vitality of determined and inspired leadership where aspirations are plentiful yet role models are few

“During our life journey, we are not here to see through each other, we are here to see each other through.” Chaitanya Charan Das

As dance artists, our passion for dance leads us through a continuous journey. Momentum ebbs and flows, and there are highs and lows as we go. Some days we travel forward at full force. We’re fully engaged. Other days we feel stagnant, waiting for the thing we need to happen, to actually occur.

My journey began in Papua New Guinea, where I was born, and I moved to Sydney, Australia when I was just three. It was in Sydney that I grew up, and it was in Sydney that I received the majority of my dance training and education. Dance has continued to lead me on a journey around the world. I studied at the Ailey Summer School in New York at the age of 18, worked as a dancer on a cruise ship that travelled around the South Pacific Islands. Later, I taught dance in Kuwait, and helped to introduce the first dance examinations into the country. Now I’m in London. The roles I have had to support this part of my journey have included that of dancer, teacher, and choreographer. I also believe in the importance of my role in helping to support others on their pathway, primarily through the youth dance company that I established in 2013, Artistry Youth Dance (AYD).

I started AYD to showcase and celebrate young dancers of African and Caribbean descent of ages 14 to 19 years. The initial incentive and inspiration is still crystal clear in my mind.

“I had just returned from working in Kuwait and was watching a performance from a leading dance school with a relatively large student body. I noticed that there were less than a handful of brown faces

onstage. Considering the cultural diversity that exists within London, that didn’t seem right. In that moment, the inspiration hit me. I had to work out a way to provide opportunities to aspiring dancers of African and Caribbean descent. It was my bid. I needed to somehow help to increase those numbers. Dancers with brown faces were underrepresented in mainstream dance companies too, particularly in ballet. I was keen to empower and encourage them.” (1)

The aim of AYD is to promote diversity in dance, increase access to engage in a range of dance forms whilst improving students’ chances of going into further education in dance and a career in the arts. Our main dance styles are Jazz, contemporary, ballet, and dance forms of the African Diaspora.

The young people work with leading dance artists, choreographers, and dance companies. We’ve had workshops led by a wonderful range of accomplished and inspirational dance artists: from people in the Lion King musical, Ballet Black, Anthony Burrell (choreographer to Mariah Carey and Beyoncé) and more.

To understand the value of what I have set up, here are some quotes about what being in AYD means for two of the young people involved:

“Being part of the company is important for me. It’s a chance for me to train alongside people with similar backgrounds and learn more about the dance culture within the African Diaspora.” Josué, aged 21.

“I am always the odd one out on dance teams so it’s really special to be a part of something like this.” Phoebe-Rae, aged 20.

We support this by taking them on theatre trips to see live dance shows and have done so since the company started in 2013. Each show we see has a diverse



cast, so the dancers see themselves reflected on stage. This year, our biggest theatre trip to date, the AYD100 project, brought 100 young black dancers to see the world-renowned Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) perform at the Sadler's Wells Theatre in September.

The first time that I experienced the AAADT it literally changed my life. Seeing talented dancers that looked like me was incredibly inspiring and left me feeling motivated and encouraged to pursue dance as a career. I remember that feeling and wanted for other young black dancers to have the chance to experience something similar.

We set up a crowdfunding campaign - AYD100 - with the aim of raising £1,600 to cover the cost of theatre tickets and programmes for the 100 young dancers. Having self-funded tickets in the past, this time we surpassed our target, and took the young people to the unforgettable experience, that was described as simply 'mind blowing' by one of the AYD100 attendees. In this, we were further supported by Sadler's Wells Theatre who donated additional tickets, enabling us to take a total of 125 young people to see the performances. And, thanks to coordination with AAADT, we arranged a 'meet and greet' with AAADT company dancers who shared their experiences with the young people.

But this wasn't enough. I wanted to extend their experience to include workshops too, so created the AYD100 Workshop Weekender to provide the young people with workshops and panel discussions to learn about the dance industry and various training options that are available. The event included masterclasses led by Mathew Rushing, Rehearsal Director for the AAADT and by company dancer Jeroboam Bozeman. This weekend was not only supported by the AAADT but also some of the leading dance and performing arts colleges, including IRIE! dance theatre, London Studio Centre, Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance, Trinity Laban and the Urdang Academy, each of who delivered workshops in a range of different dance styles.

Even more exciting was that the



Above: AYD, Alvin Ailey Masterclass.
Photo: Pierre Tappon Photography

Left top to bottom: AYD, Temptation; AYD, Belonging; AYD, A Cure for Longing. Photos: Carole Edrich



Weekender included an audition class whereby the schools were to offer one or two scholarships to their short courses. They were so impressed by the talent that a thrilling total of 42 different scholarships to both part-time and full-time courses were awarded. This far exceeded our initial expectations. Eloise (12), who was awarded a scholarship to the Associates Programme at London Studio Centre, told me "It feels good to know someone is wanting you to dance and wanting you to get better."

At the same time, Dance Consortium invited us to take part in a live-streamed Masterclass with the AAADT and hosted by Hakeem Onidubo. 20 Artistry Youth Dance students, together with young people from Impact Youth, joined Rehearsal Director, Matthew Rushing, and AAADT company dancers Khalia Campbell, Michael Jackson Jnr, and Renaldo Maurice, on the Sadler's Wells

mainstage for another unforgettable experience.

I do all this with my team, who I appreciate dearly. We believe in what we do. We want more young dancers of African and Caribbean descent to be uplifted, inspired, and encouraged to pursue their dreams in dance, the arts, or whatever career path they choose.

There are also personal benefits. Developing the AYD100 project has been an exciting, inspirational journey for me. It is uplifting to see so many young people motivated to continue their own journeys through dance. As dance artists we know that the experiences we have, particularly during our teenage years, can shape us for life.

Of course, I'm not alone in this task of supporting diversity in the dance world, and I hope to continue – with others – to make a positive contribution along my path. The successes achieved by AYD100 and the young

people themselves have motivated me to continue to move forward. It's important, it's rewarding, and I would encourage anyone who feels they have a purpose, to follow it as I have. There will always be challenges – lack of funding and lack of support, and those who are just not your cheerleaders, but the positives always prevail and somehow, they see you through.

So, the journey continues. Join us. Talk to us. Or follow your own.

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AYD perform with AAADT:

youtu.be/ybjGu02VwNs

References

Paraphrased excerpt from Not the Only One from Growing Up African In Australia, edited by Maxine Beneba Clarke.