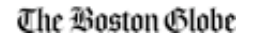


JAMAICA PLAIN



Dance changed 'just another punk' Williams's studio creates a safe space

By Dave Demerjian, Globe Correspondent | May 21, 2006

"I was lost," says Tony Williams, of the years he spent growing up poor in Jamaica Plain. "I was just another punk from the projects."

Williams, known for producing the "Urban Nutcracker" and as the first African-American principal of the Boston Ballet, credits dance with providing the structure and sense of possibility that helped him navigate a tough childhood. His Tony Williams Dance Center, which moved last month into a new space at Jamaica Plain's Brewery, is located less than a mile from the Bromley-Heath housing project where he was raised.

Born in 1946 to an Italian mother and an African-American GI in Naples, Williams' family settled at Bromley Heath in 1954. Williams remembers 1950s Jamaica Plain as a working-class neighborhood with a bar on nearly every corner, and says that like other kids from Bromley, he joined a gang, got in fights, and tried to avoid juvenile detention.

"We got in trouble, then went to Blessed Sacrament and confessed," he says, laughing. But, "The gangs were different back then," he says. "You fought with your fists, not by pulling out a gun."

As a teenager, Williams began lifting weights at the Young Men's Christian Union on Boylston Street, and became fascinated by a group of older teens who assembled there to practice gymnastics.

"This skinny kid from the inner city started hanging around, watching us practice," recalls Dr. Myron Allukian Jr. of Williams. "So we began teaching him some moves. We were a friendly group, and we thought this kid might need something to keep him out of trouble."

When members of the group began studying dance in order to improve their gymnastics, Williams gave it a try.

An athlete who once dreamed of playing pro baseball, Williams showed natural ability, and won a scholarship to study with the Boston Ballet's E. Virginia Williams. She asked him to join the company in 1964. "I was only 17 years old, but I knew that I had found my calling," he says.

Over the next decade, Williams danced with the prestigious Joffrey Ballet in New York, as well as companies in Canada, Norway, and Portugal.

"For a poor kid from Jamaica Plain, experiencing New York and California in the late 1960s was something else," he recalls. "It was all free love, antiwar protests, and civil rights marches. It felt like we were on the brink of something big."

He retired from dance in the 1980s, and for a time taught at Wellesley College and Roxbury Community College. In 1990, he began producing the "Urban Nutcracker", a multicultural interpretation of the classic tale performed by a mix of professional and student dancers. He launched BalletRox, a nonprofit program that provides dance scholarships to underserved youth, in 1995.

Ilanga Scott, a singer and dancer who performs with the Urban Nutcracker, believes that groups like BalletRox have never been more important. "With the violence in this city, kids need something to believe in," he says. "Tony's giving it to them."

Scott, who is 65 and as a teenager used to hold vocal rehearsals in Bromley-Heath's acoustically friendly hallways, believes that Williams' upbringing and biracial heritage have influenced his career.

Williams says Jamaica Plain's ethnic and socio-economic mix inspire him.

"The diversity is amazing," he says. "We've got biracial families, gay and lesbian families, rich and poor."

His new space, he says, which is four times the size of his former studio two blocks away, will allow for more classes, and more students. He is determined to make his studio an inclusive, safe space for everyone.

"When people come here, they leave whatever baggage or stereotypes they might have at the door," he says. "Here, we are all just dancers." ■

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