



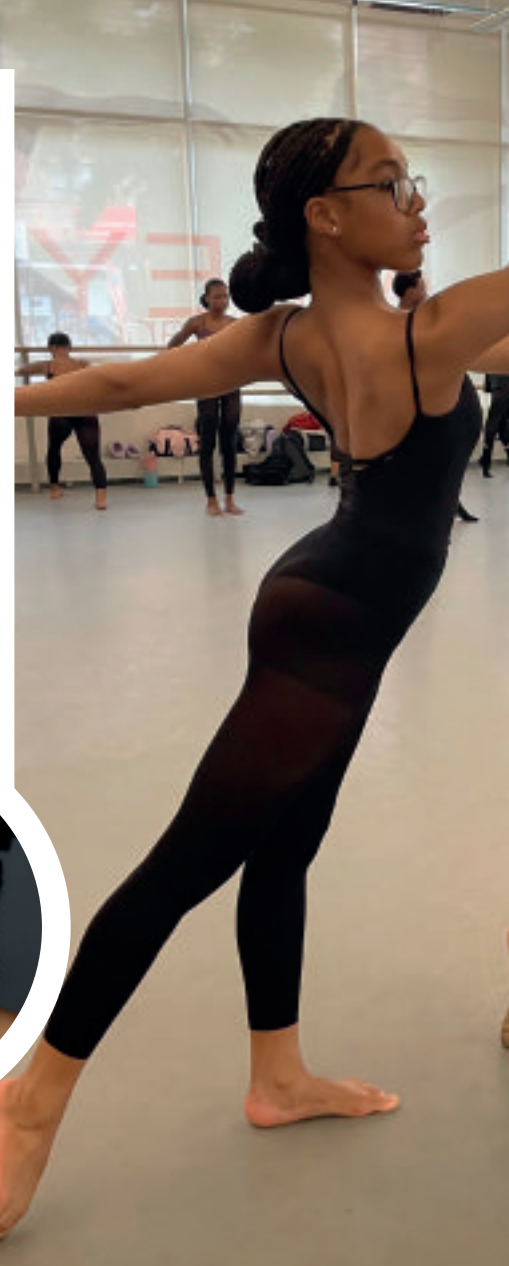
# Nurturing waves

The 10 year ripple effect of Artistry Youth Dance

**Kamara Gray**, Artistic Director of Artistry Youth Dance, looks back on a decade of developing and empowering young dancers of African and Caribbean heritage. Here, on the page, as in the studio, she creates the space for self-expression as two company members, Eloise Badu and Sarima Chukundah, recount how the company propelled them to the world-renowned Ailey School's Summer Intensive in New York, for a taste of the professional dance performance industry.



Artistry Youth Dance in Stand Up, choreographed by André Fabien Francis. Photo: Miguel Altunaga.



I founded Artistry Youth Dance (AYD) in April 2013 to create a youth dance company that empowered and supported young dancers of African and Caribbean heritage. We wanted to provide high quality training and unforgettable dance opportunities with industry leaders and professionals in the hope the young dancers would feel able to achieve their goals and ambitions in dance. We recognised that all this might inspire other young Black dancers to have a positive impact in the dance world, creating a ripple effect. Ultimately, we wanted to grow a more culturally diverse dance community in the UK.

Our young people go on to train at leading dance schools and universities. They progress to the West End, dance companies, tv, film, theatre, live events and many industries beyond dance.

Here, in one example of these achievements, company dancers Eloise Badu and Sarima Chukundah detail their recent experiences attending the world-renowned Ailey School's July 2023 Summer Intensive. They were two of five AYD members presented with this opportunity, after being selected from the Dance Consortium led Ailey Project UK and a community effort supported their ambitions. With the support of the AYD team, their family and friends, we received generous donations from our supporters and sponsorships from Bloch, who provided their dance attire and Sheer Chemistry, who supplied their skin-tone dance tights.

**Eloise Badu, age 16**

"I've been a company dancer with AYD for 4 years. After I had just joined Artistry my dance teacher, Kamara Gray, offered me a ticket to see the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at Sadler's Wells. That show drove me to want nothing more than

Above LtoR: Brenda Garrett-Glassman Artistry Youth Dance Company's AYD100 Dance Workshop & Scholarship Programme 2022. Photo: Foteini Christofilopoulou. Sarima and Eloise at Summer Sizzler Performance, Ailey Summer Intensive. Photo: Sarima Chukundah. Kamara Gray. Photo: Urban Decay Visuals. Sarima and Eloise in studio. Photo: Sarima Chukundah. Eloise and Sarima outside McMahon Hall NY. Photo: Eloise Badu. Ailey School Summer Sizzler Intensive performance backstage. Photo: Eloise Badu.

to be part of the Ailey Company. Three years later, Kamara offered me an opportunity to be part of the Ailey Summer Project in Milton Keynes: four days of classes and performances with Ailey School artists. On day three, we were told about an audition for the Ailey School's 4-week Summer Intensive in New York. When the audition came, I gave everything I could. When I got accepted onto the programme, I felt just an inch closer to my dream.

The experience was like no other. I loved it. We had ballet every day and modern, Horton, contemporary, Limón and repertoire in rotation. The teachers were amazing, some of the best I've had. We ended with a Summer Sizzler performance. The show was full of excitement, a chance for friends and



family to see all our work and improvements over the month. I went into the school just ready to take in everything I could. Any expectations I had were exceeded.

My most significant learning was what my next steps would be after college and what it would be like to start my career. The experience deepened my understanding of the transition from dancing in a youth company to dancing professionally.

It was challenging to feel my improvement and notice changes in my dancing. Once you get into the routine of training, you might not notice the positive changes that are being made physically and mentally. So, not necessarily a challenge – more of an awakening. I did finally manage to notice the changes in my dancing when I returned home and resumed my normal classes. I felt a lot stronger and a lot more confident.

“I gave everything I could. When I got accepted onto the programme, I felt just an inch closer to my dream.”

I intend to use the skills I learnt in the intensive for the rest of my dancing career – not being scared to ask teachers for feedback after class, learning and working on things outside the studio, not hiding at the back of class and making friends with lots of different people, amongst many others. I would advise any young dancers and any young people at all, to be brave. It’s rare that you’ll get everything you want by standing in the corner and hard work beats talent every time! My future goal is to get back to NYC and dance full time with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.”

**Sarima Chukundah, age 16**

“I have been a part of AYD since 2020, after finding them through AYD100, the company’s annual career event where aspiring Black dancers can meet professional dancer role-models and learn about dance schools and courses. AYD has provided me with a plethora of opportunities, including our involvement with the iconic Ailey School.

I was invited to the Ailey Project UK Summer Intensive in Milton Keynes with Dance Consortium in 2022. I was aware of Ailey’s mark on the dance industry, but unprepared for such a memorable experience. I felt nervous excitement because the school is so acclaimed and wanted to soak up everything I could. The four days felt like a snippet of being in the industry. The motivational criticism, knowledge and expertise was incredible and having live music was so valuable. I wholeheartedly enjoyed the quality of the teaching and how different – but fun – the classes were.

On day four was an audition which initially felt daunting, but I decided to try my ultimate best, enjoy it and put everything into my dancing. I was later taken aback to learn I’d been offered a place

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Kamara with students at the Ailey School Summer Intensive in NY. Photo: Kamara Gray.

on their Summer Intensive. I had felt so inspired by the Ailey company and even started to dream about being a company dancer one day. Receiving this offer, I resolved that my dancing would be even better than 'up to standard' and AYD helped this every week.

The experience at the Ailey School in New York was unforgettable and I was so privileged to be able to follow such high standard classes daily. Despite the intensity, I loved every second of ballet, contemporary, Limón, Horton and repertoire. It was extremely challenging considering I hadn't done some of the styles, however, I was continuously motivated by my peers and teachers.

Spending this time with people from all around the world was so precious and I treasure all the relationships I built. I was able to learn from everyone's unique qualities and the talent was unbelievable. Doing what I love every day is not something everyone is able to experience. Watching myself improve before my eyes was extremely satisfying (and terrifying). My favourite moment was performing at the Summer Sizzler, with my favourite people, in a vibrant showcase of our ability and improvements. The daily soreness and exhaustion from giving it my all really paid off and it's something I'll cherish forever.

Something I took away from the experience is that learning to appreciate everyone and their experiences and listening to those around you will pave the way for you to embrace your own qualities, and then your creativity will flourish."

AYD's continued achievements allow us to remain hopeful for the future of dance. We have received numerous awards for our work and in 2023, we won the Deutsch Bank Award for Creative Entrepreneurship, delivered in partnership with Mewe360. We were one of five award recipients out of 573 applicants. Our further awards include

the One Dance UK award for Dance in the Community, and I was recognised as one of 25 Black Leaders in theatre by the Alfred Fagon Award.

Alongside our youth dance company, we deliver a programme of group theatre trips, projects, workshops and performances. Our AYD100 Dance Workshop and Scholarship Programme is one of many projects that we are proud of. We invite young Black dancers to 4 days of workshops, panel discussions and masterclasses, to learn about career and training progression routes. We partner with eight leading dance and musical theatre schools, universities and conservatoires, who at the event, award scholarships for a range of their programmes. At our 2023 event, scholarships to the value of £135,000 were awarded to young people in attendance - creating that ripple effect.

We hope for this impact to reach far and wide, and going forward, we have big ambitions: a full-time programme and working more closely with dance and arts organisations to realise this lasting change, by continuing to engage in a meaningful way with dancers of African and Caribbean heritage. We are keen to continue to work with those who have this shared goal and who, too, want to create a ripple effect. We know that we have many more achievements and ripples to make over the next 10 years and beyond. Thanks to the work of the AYD team, students, parents, our supporters and partner organisations, we know that the journey is just beginning.

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