

A journey from city streets to center stage

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For choreographer Khalid Hill, dance is a life-changing force

By Thea Singer, Globe Correspondent | December 17, 2004

Funny how life imitates art. Sort of.

If asked, Khalid Hill -- tap choreographer for BalletRox's "Urban Nutcracker" and hooper with the touring company of Savion Glover's "Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk" -- probably wouldn't identify with E.T.A. Hoffmann's holiday tale of a girl transported from her family's Victorian parlor to a magical land of sweets with the help of a sorcerous godfather and a wooden nutcracker soldier. But metaphorically, the comparison isn't far-fetched.

Hill, who just turned 25, grew up first on Dorchester's Columbia Road and later on Roxbury's Circuit Street. He recalls a "little crack house" across the way from his parents' Roxbury condo when he was a boy, and has friends who have been shot or are still selling drugs on the corner -- just as they were 10 years ago. His flight from the everyday, though, came not through sleight of hand but through sleight of feet: Dance -- specifically, rhythm-tap -- sent him soaring, professionally and personally.

"I didn't grow up slingin' and gang bangin' or anything like that," says Hill, who began dancing at age 4 with Andrea Herbert Major at the Roxbury Center for the Performing Arts because his mother, a Boston public school teacher, thought he was "clumsy." Hill was "forever changed," he says, when he encountered hoofing -- "hard tap, real rhythmic flat-footed intricate rhythms" -- at age 10 when he was selected at a mass audition for Glover's "The Great Tap Reunion."

"I was always involved in something artistic," says Hill. "Had I not been, I honestly don't know where I'd be right now."

"Urban Nutcracker," which kicks off its fourth season today at Dorchester's Strand Theatre, is a fitting vehicle for the theme of transformation. The brainchild of BalletRox artistic director Anthony Williams, who in 1964 danced in Boston Ballet's first "Nutcracker" and became a principal in the company, the show maintains the spirit of the traditional story but opens up the scenario to reflect the people and places that an inner-city audience might conjure in its imagination today. The movement embraces everything from ballet and swing to hip-hop and urban tap. The Sugar Plum Fairy, Ana Lobe, was a principal with the Ballet Nacional de Cuba. The music commingles Tchaikovsky's score with Duke Ellington's "Nutcracker Suite," and incorporates live drummers and vocalists from 1950s doo-wop groups such as the G-Clefs.

Hill's trajectory from city streets to center stage seems to be a legacy at the eight-year-old BalletRox, based in Jamaica Plain. Williams, for his part, grew up the oldest of nine children in the Bromley-Heath housing projects in Jamaica Plain and hung out with the Apprilli Juniors gang before finding ballet. "Dance was that spiritual thing that I had been searching for from lives past," says Williams, now 57. "It was something that really made me who I am."

Roslindale native Cyrus Brooks, 16, in turn, has found meaning through movement by studying tap with Hill. Brooks met the hooper eight years ago backstage at the Strand, where Brooks's mother was performing with Hill, and four years later began taking the choreographer's classes at Williams's JP School of Dance, which is committed to making dance available to inner-city kids. "Khalid let Cyrus wear his shoes backstage," Brooks's mother, Janet Allen-Brooks says with a laugh. "The shoes were like six sizes too big." (Hill wears a 9EE tap shoe, with soles that are "built up," he says, "because I hit so dang-gone hard.")

"Khalid didn't only teach me dance, he taught me life lessons through dance," says Brooks. Like how to deal with authority. In the upcoming "Urban Nutcracker," Brooks will appear in the two numbers that Hill has choreographed: "Prologue" and "Orphans in a Shoe." "His taking me under his wing kept me from being tempted by my peers," Brooks says.

For Hill, Andrea Herbert Major's insistence on discipline (everyone had to learn ballet and jazz as well as tap) and his parents' strict educational focus kept him from a life on the streets, despite his friendships with boys who took a decidedly different path. Hill attended St. Kevin's, in Dorchester, and in 1998 graduated from Boston Latin, after finishing his last two years with tutors while on the road for Glover's show. He was just one of eight black boys in a class of more than 300. Last December, he graduated from the University of Massachusetts at Boston with a degree in business, a focus sparked by a contract dispute during the tour. "Had I had the information I have now, a lot of situations would have turned out totally different." And he has just finished applying to NYU's Tisch School for the Arts to earn a master's in performance studies -- an endeavor he plans to complement by finding an agent and auditioning for dance roles in New York.

"I was definitely the oddball on the street," says Hill, though you'd never know it to look at him. Today he's wearing an oversize

Avirex leather jacket, baggy Thirty Below jeans with pockets on the knees, Timberland work boots with the tongue hanging out, and a wool hat over his dreadlocks. "Out of the ones [guys from his old neighborhood] I'm cool with, I'm probably the only one that went to college, the only one who didn't get a GED, the only one whose both parents were together. It was almost like from a bird's eye I saw everything going on, but I was too busy to even be a part of that."

The only time that Hill considered going over to the other side was after he'd been on tour with "Bring in 'Da Noise" for a time. "When I was separated from my comfortable environment, that's when just mentally I was everywhere," he says. "I think I really was about to cross the line. . . . Just being around groupies all the time, living out of your suitcase, the whole sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll -type fare for two years, everybody cheating on their wives."

But the love of dancing -- and becoming a born-again Christian -- pulled him back. Hill can dance even when he's sitting down with his hands in the pockets of his giant jacket, a typical pose while talking. His feet become firecrackers, barely lifting off the ground but eliciting a volley of taps that end with a snap as satisfying as that of ball against bat.

"Hoofing is dancing from the waist down," he says. "The most fundamental aspect of hoofing is improvisation and rhythm. You focus on hitting rhythms rather than the . . . movement. So even though it's highly visual, it's highly auditory." His thoughts while under the dance influence seem to sharpen to a point. "I go, oh, I want to hit this, I want to hit it, I want to hit this, yo, I just want to hit it," he says. "The audience ceases to be. I'm dancing more for me than for them." ■

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