

Orange School for the Performing Arts

This time they run through it with the music. A slight frown creases Demetia's face. "This dance is getting worse," she grouses. Her crestfallen students shuffle to the sidelines to take a needed break.

For comic relief, the energizer bunny himself, OSPA Director, Ricardo Porter brings two four-year-olds out for a number they've been rehearsing. One of the kids is Heather Powell's daughter, Randa. Heather is Ricardo's co-director and business partner. She and the assembled teenagers and parents can't help but smile as the kids and Ricky mug through the routine.

It was 18 years ago that Orange County High School graduate, Ricardo Porter started the Orange School for the Performing Arts. He was 19 at the time, having learned the dance trade from his own mentor, Charis Wallace of Spotsylvania Ballet.

Since then, OSPA has come a long way. With 250 students and 10 employees, "we do pretty much everything. We do lyrical, tap, jazz, hip-hop, musical theatre, obviously ballet, modern." Porter ticks off the list. Every year they perform either the 'Nutcracker' at Christmas, or an end-of-the-year show, as well as maintain a rigorous performance and competition schedule both locally and around the state. In the studio's reception area, legions of dance trophies crowd the shelves, bearing testimony to OSPA's competition success.

It's busy around here, with instructors teaching simultaneously in several mirror-lined dance studios. Located in the basement and ground floor space of the old firehouse on Main St., Orange, OSPA schedules dance classes weekdays from 4-9:30 p.m., plus rehearsals Saturday and Sunday mornings. Friday and Saturday afternoons and evenings are set aside for performances, workshops and more rehearsals.

Porter points to Demetia. "She's been fantastic," he gushes. "It's been a joy to watch her grow up and now see her doing it for real, doing it out there with people you took her to see." He is heartened that her eventual goal is to come back home and share her experience, knowledge, technique and grace with future students. "We have what is called a mentoring program here where we have some kids come in and assist us. So we teach them how to teach. So, when we're old and can't do it anymore, they can take over."

Demetia Hopkins just nods and smiles demurely, as if to say, "When that time comes, I'll be here."



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
OSPA founder and co-director, Ricardo Porter mugs through a routine with four year olds, Randa Powell and Zeb Bowers.



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
Focused and business-like, Demetia Hopkins gives some local teenagers a taste of what it's like to be in a professional rehearsal.



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
Looking far into the future, Demetia Hopkins wants to return to Orange and establish a dance outreach program for area students who cannot afford lessons.



PHOTO BY PAUL KOLNIK
Demetia Hopkins of Orange is the dancer on the far right in this publicity photo from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre.

"Five...six...seven," Demetia Hopkins crisply counts the cadence at a Saturday afternoon modern dance rehearsal. Tall, trim, and angular she resembles a cat as she paces in front of the mirrored wall at the Orange School for the Performing Arts. She watches intently as her advanced students do a routine she choreographed.

Demetia is all business. When she sees a problem, she stops them. They look to her, question marks on their faces. She consults her notes, then flawlessly demonstrates various moves. One, where she cartwheels from a seated to a standing position by rolling over onto her back, boggles the mind.

Some of them have trouble getting their legs over their heads as they roll. Demetia (pronounced de-MEE-tah, not shah) patiently helps them out. She even tows one girl by the ankle until she gets

Hopkins is breathtaking to watch. Every move she makes is graceful, even if she's just taking a seat on a bench.

it.

Hopkins is breathtaking to watch. Every move she makes is graceful, even if she's just taking a seat on a bench. With her signature huge earrings and tight cornrows, she commands a certain presence. She doesn't yell; speaks softly instead. The teenage girls in her troupe don't Twitter. They don't text. They don't eye-roll. All of their attention is focused on this 23-year-old local-born and raised professional dancer.

This was probably their last rehearsal with her for awhile because the next day Demetia boarded a bus to New York City. Monday morning she went into rehearsal herself with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre in preparation for the storied company's 2011 national tour. That tour started Feb. 1 in Washington, D.C. Many of the teenagers, kids and parents at the Orange School for the Performing Arts (OSPA) hopped on a chartered bus this past Saturday to see this former student and coach perform on the Kennedy Center Opera House stage.

Demetia Hopkins... You've come a long way from when you showed up as a blubbery five year old at your uncle's dance studio 18 years ago. Both Demetia and her uncle, Ricardo Porter, the founder of OSPA burst out laughing as they remember that incident.

"My earliest memory is being in tap class, actually," grins Demetia. "And I'm horrible at tap; never got it... still!" she shudders. She admits that learning just a few tap moves for Alvin Ailey "takes me forever. Like I go home and work so hard on those steps so I don't look crazy doing them onstage. So, I guess one of my earliest memories here, is being in that small studio there and bawling just because I couldn't understand tap. I couldn't get it!"

She screws up her face to portray a five year old hav-

ing a tantrum. "Boo hoo, Uncle Ricky, I... just...don't...want...to...do...it... anymore," she mock sobs. Ricardo rolls his eyes and confirms that she cried a lot in the beginning. "It's hard when your uncle teaches you... I'm sure it was tough for her and then for me as well, to have your niece and then your niece, who is a fantastic dancer, to be in the studio with you. And then you have to not show favoritism. So it was a juggling act for both of us. It worked out well." He barks his signature staccato laugh.

Demetia unhesitatingly credits him as her mentor. Up through Orange Elementary, Prospect Heights and OCHS, she spent all of her after-school time at the studio. "Every day, right here." The gym teacher at OCHS tried to recruit her for the track team, but she told him, "I just didn't have the time for it." Besides, she says her friends, her fellow dancers, were all here. "I just remember those girls being some of my closest friends at the time, and we had so much fun, just rehearsing and just stretching. I just remember that bonding that I had with those girls."

Porter realized immediately his niece had talent. "She was always very, very gifted," he babbles rapidly. "And it was one of those things where you go, 'wow, some people are just born to do it and she was one of those people.'"

She also took instructions well; well maybe not in tap dance, but generally when Ricardo told her to do this or do that, she did it. And she made it look easy. Porter remembers cautioning, "Just because something's easy you still have to have the background for it and you still have to have the work ethic. At some point you have to make decisions for yourself and decide this is what I'm going to do, and when you do it, hold yourself accountable to it."

He comes up for air; then launches back into a torrent

of words. "So, it's hard to do that and be the uncle and not just the dance teacher. You know? You sometimes felt like the bad guy. 'No, you can't go to the movies with all your friends. You said you were coming to rehearsal.' It's a little easier to do that when it's not your niece."

Up until she was a senior in high school, Demetia Hopkins knew that she loved dance but had no idea it would be her career. "I loved it so much, I couldn't think about not doing it. But I honestly didn't know much about the dance world outside of this studio and other competition studios in this area." Sure, she had seen Alvin Ailey's company at the Kennedy Center and the Dance Theatre of Harlem, and she had attended special workshops and summer programs. "But I guess I just never thought that that could be me. I definitely enjoyed the performance, I was inspired by it, but I never thought 'Oh, I can do that.'"

Then Uncle Ricky told her about the Ailey-Fordham Bachelor of Fine Arts program "where you can do academics at Fordham University and do your dance classes with Alvin Ailey...I felt that's where I wanted to be. It felt good."

During her senior year in college, she landed a spot with Ailey II, a junior company that toured small cities all across the United States and Canada. They even went to Germany. "So I was still completing my academic work my senior year, but I was doing it on the road." And then a year ago this coming April, she auditioned for the main company.

Talk. She was so nervous, she told no one; not her uncle, not even her own mother. She describes the annual cattle call. "All the women kind of pile into this huge studio," she shudders. "There's about 100 of us. They make several cuts throughout the day. You take ballet class; they make a cut. Have a little modern combination and make a cut. You do some repertory, and it just goes on like that."

Little by little, the 100 women were winnowed down to several small groups. "They taught us some repertory... and after all of the groups had gone one or two times, they kind of lined us all up and we were thinking, 'Okay, here comes another cut.'" Instead, Alvin Ailey's Artistic Director, the legendary Judith Jamison, thanked them all for coming and called out two numbers. One number, Demetia recognized immediately as that of her close friend, Gray Devore, who was standing right next to her. Assuming that they would only pick one woman,

Demetia turned to congratulate her with the mixed emotions of a first runner-up in a beauty contest.

"And then she called my number," says Demetia incredulously. "And immediately I had to look down at my number just to make sure, just to make sure, and immediately I started to cry. And I turned to Gray, we were just hugging each other."

She went out into the hallway, still reeling from the realization that she had been picked from a field of 100 women to join the first company of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. She called her mom in tears. "She kind of panicked because when your child calls you crying, you obviously think something's wrong. All I could say was 'Mom, I made it.'" And even though Demetia had breathed not a word of this to anyone prior, her mother "knew exactly what that meant. 'Mom, I made it. I made the first company.'"

She immediately went into rehearsal, debuted at the Brookline Academy of Music in New York and then embarked on a national and international tour that included performances in England, Scotland and Israel. The current tour started in Washington last week and will take them to Atlanta, Miami, L.A., Detroit. "The cities get kind of fuzzy after that."

Founded in 1958 in New York, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre is arguably the most prestigious modern dance company in the nation, if not the world. The company has performed for an estimated 21 million people in 48 states and 71 countries on six continents, including two historic residencies in South Africa.

In 1960, Ailey choreographed his signature piece 'Revelations.' Fifty years later, it is still being performed regularly. "It sort of became his masterpiece," explains Demetia. "He kept choreographing after that, but everyone looked back to 'Revelations.' It's set to traditional spirituals and hymns...things you would hear in an old Baptist church." Ailey died in 1989, but the company of African-American dancers continued to flourish. This year, Ailey's hand-picked successor, Judith Jamison, will step down and transfer the artistic reins to Robert Battle who has created ballets for the company since 1999.

So what is it like for a young lady from little ol' Orange to be dancing on the same stage with these people? For one thing, it's tough. The average person in the audience has no idea. Horror stories abound about chore-

ographers like Michael Flatly of Riverdance reducing experienced dancers to a puddle of tears and bloody feet. At Alvin Ailey, it's not as bad as that, but Demetia confirms, if you screw up, they will get on your case. "Yeah, they do," she shrugs, "but it's a great team that you're working with. The artistic staff is just amazing and they're so personable about it. Working you hard, but it's very nurturing in a way. It's not demeaning...Everyone is kind of helping and feeding off of each other."

She is also observant. "You see some of these older dancers, they've been in the company for 30 years now, and so you know that they have so much wisdom and so much to offer. I can't help but sit and watch in awe, like you're taking notes in your head. Like, 'I love the way she does that, and how is she conveying that through her movement... how is she doing that...' I'm always taking notes in my head. I'm watching from the corner. I'm in the hallway, kind of peeking in."

When asked what is it about dance, Demetia pauses so long to answer that the question almost bears repeating. "For me, (pause) I just feel so, um, I feel so open and so free of everything when I'm dancing. It's like the biggest release or relief ever. That's where I let out my frustration, my joy, my everything. All of those emotions can just come out through dance. I just feel amazing when I'm dancing. It makes me feel so good. I'm overjoyed. Whatever is going wrong in my life or if something's not going my way, you just dance through it." She beams radiantly.

Demetia Hopkins, you've come a long way, from a sniveling five-year-old who couldn't tap to this poised, articulate, graceful, young woman who has been chosen to join 30 of the best dancers in the world. Does it get any better than this? "For me, it doesn't," says Demetia humbly from a back room at OSPA in the old

Orange Firehouse.

At this point in the story, one would be tempted to say, she has never looked back. But that's not true. "Even after I left for college, I came back. When I was on break, I'd take classes. I still take classes here. I take ballet, I take jazz. Sometimes when classes aren't going on, I'll ask Ricardo to do a private lesson with me."

And she plans to keep coming back. While touring with Ailey, Hopkins did some outreach work through a

program called Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey. "They're going into public schools. They do free performances. They bring the Ailey Trio in. All of these kids are introduced to this professional company. And then they have a talk with the kids afterwards; all of these kids, sixth grade and under, they are allowed free dance classes with this program." She pauses to make a point. "That's something I would love to do here in Orange because I don't feel like these kids are introduced to the arts enough." She wants to make it available to local students who can't afford dance classes.

She refers to the troupe that she's coaching this bleak Saturday afternoon. "They don't realize they can do it after high school, and get paid for it. This is a career." And she's living proof. "It's not a part-time job; it's your career, and you can love doing it. So, eventually I would love to have that sort of

program in Orange where these kids can go take these free dance classes."

But Orange will have to wait. Demetia Hopkins has places to go, routines to rehearse, and ballets to perform both here and abroad. She is at the peak of her game, and she's going to take it as far as she can. "I'm in for the ride," she smiles, as she counts the cadence at OSPA's Main Street performance space. "Five, six, seven..."



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
Lithe and graceful, Demetia Hopkins makes every move look easy.



PHOTO BY ANDREW ECCLES FOR THE ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATRE
Demetia Hopkins joined the main company of Alvin Ailey's American Dance Theatre last April. She is currently on a nationwide tour with the modern dance troupe.



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
Demetia Hopkins coaches one of her students on how to cartwheel from a prone position to standing upright.