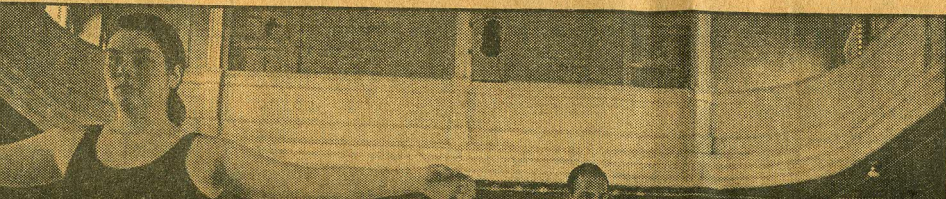




Staff photos by Mark L. Thompson

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Against

Clay Taliaferro, a 1959 graduate of Dunbar High School, has taught dance at Duke University for seven years.



Taliaferro works with Audrey Todd to help her perfect a move. He places an emphasis on movement in general, rather than dance technique.

Against All Odds

Native son breaks barriers to find niche in dance

By Valarie Jackson

Staff writer

DURHAM, N.C. — It's a picture-perfect spring afternoon on the campus of Duke University — a day when one is more inclined to lie on the lush campus lawn than work up a sweat in an intermediate modern dance class.

It is certainly not one of those days a professor would expect 100 percent from his class — Lynchburg native Clayton Taliaferro does, but today he isn't quite getting it.

His 13 students — 11 women and two men who are white, black and Asian — dance stiffly with little emotion through the routine he just ran through for them.

Then, when he has had enough, he teases them

in a way that combines the unlikely elements of warmth, humor, frustration and lyrics from the rock musical "Tommy."

"Is your flesh warm? Do you have a heart beat? See me, feel me — isn't there a song like that?"

"Why do they write these songs? Why do they write plays, write songs and write books — to get feeling out of you."

Then, after an exaggerated demonstration on the students' lack of grace (which gets a few snickers), he continues.

"There isn't a person who dances like that," he said. "Well, there is, because you have the person in front of you."

Music starts again, and they get through that routine satisfactorily, but it isn't long before Taliaferro starts again.

"When are exams?"

"Two weeks," the students coyly reply.

"Who are my seniors?"

A handful raise their hands.

"Don't worry," he laughs, "it gets worse when you leave here."

Taliaferro, who just turned 54 three weeks ago, should know. He became a dance professor at Duke University after an arduous 23-year journey to overcome segregation and beat the odds.

He has spent seven years there, and he's beginning to show a few signs of the seven-year itch.

"I can understand needing a break after seven years. Now, I need to fulfill myself and

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re-examine the way I teach."

Taliaferro isn't known for his ability to stay in one place too long. Since 1962, he has been with eight national touring companies, choreographed 20 pieces, was commissioned to do 19 more and has done numerous free-lance and guest artist performances — not counting fellowships, Broadway and Off-Broadway and stock productions, festivals and directorships.

Even now, he keeps a home in Lynchburg, an apartment in Durham, travels to Finland occasionally to teach and still performs in New York City.

"I'm still in the profession," he said. "I continue to have my professional life beyond the campus — I have to be current, to be able to do what I do. If I'm dry, the students are going to be dry."

That's not a bad track record for someone who started late — at the relatively old age of 21.

"They say it's late, but I had to dispel that," he said.

He has wanted to dance since he was 13, but was held back by the twisted logic of a segregated society that only had one dance school which didn't teach black children.

"How my life would have changed if I had a place to learn then," he said.

In place of dance, Taliaferro preferred sports which emphasized graceful movements, like swimming and tennis.

"I didn't play football or basketball because I didn't want to get hurt," he said.

Meanwhile, his dream to perform was kept alive by the magic of television, where blacks like Nat King Cole and Leontyne Price were starting to break new

When I mentioned I wanted to go into the theater, she (high school guidance counselor) said, 'No, don't you dare. You have to come back home and teach, to liberate your people.' I felt I could liberate more people in the theater, by letting other young people know that it's OK to do this.'

Clay Taliaferro

prior to his 1959 graduation knowing exactly what he wanted to do with his life — he wanted to be in theater.

His counselor had other ideas.

"When I mentioned I wanted to go into the theater, she said, 'No, don't you dare. You have to come back home and teach, to liberate your people.'"

"I felt I could liberate more people in the theater, by letting other young people know that it's OK to do this."

In fact, Taliaferro's liberation came when he left Lynchburg for New York City at the advice of Bob Harman, who was director and instructor in the art wing of the Lynchburg Art Center from 1958 to 1961.

"He said, 'Just get out and do it,'" Taliaferro said. "He pushed me ahead because there was a glimmer of talent in me."

In New York City, where he studied at the Gene Frankel Theatre Academy, he was inspired by black dance pioneers like Alvin Ailey.

"I saw Alvin Ailey and Don McKayle and said 'There are

people who look like me do what I want to do — it can be done.'"

He left Gene Frankel to study dance at the Boston Conservatory of Music in 1960. He joined the first national touring company, the Boston Dance Theatre, a few years later.

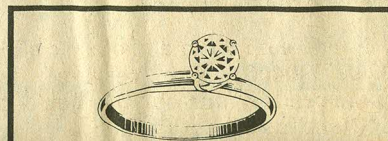
"I did anything and everything I could do that involved dancing," he said. "I made my living dancing — I've never had to supplement it with anything else. In the mid-1960s, I was on the road more than not."

Despite the run-in with his high school guidance counselor, wasn't long before Taliaferro began to teach.

"I got into teaching in 1968 when it first became apparent to me that teaching could be part of what I do."

He takes a liberal approach to teaching dance, emphasizing less on dance technique and more on movement in general.

"We're in such a world where the boundaries these days that are so sinful to teach any other way,"



said. "I feel dancers need first to learn about movement and motion — often they are so saturated in a style and they can't adapt to anything else."

He last appeared in Lynchburg in 1978, performing with the Theatre Dance Trio at the Lynchburg Fine Arts Center, but he still has family here, and maintains a home on Krise Circle.

"For some hidden reason, I'm back in Lynchburg. I was going to live either in Lynchburg, Paris or Seattle, and I chose Lynchburg."

For Taliaferro, familiarity breeds content.

"It's nice to know something so deeply — I know the earth of that place— there's so much potential in Lynchburg."

But until there is more support for the arts, don't expect Taliaferro to be the catalyst of a dance renaissance in his hometown.

"I'd like to do something in Lynchburg, but there is still no financial support," he said. "The financial support and the way art is looked upon there is so different."

Part of the reason is the predominant attitude that the visual and performing arts are interests for highbrow people

who have time to pursue them.

"But dance steps come from the peasants and went to the courts," he said. "In order to save the culture, we must accept art on its own terms — it is what it is.

"They will only understand and accept the arts if they understand it is by and for them — the day Americans feel the arts is a part of their lives, we'll jump threefold ahead to an acceptance and tolerance of one another."

Taliaferro believes that the main thing holding dance back is fear.

"Movement reveals you for who you are," he said. "That's why people are afraid of movement — they are afraid of what it will reveal."

The revelations he gets from movement and dance are the reason that, although he has reached middle age, Taliaferro has no plans to stop.

"I don't dance the way I did at 24, but I have no desire to do that," he said. "I look at the work being done and the work I do, and I smile and say, 'I'm right on target.'

"I will be involved in dance somehow for the rest of my life," he said. "I want to open people's eyes to the potential of movement in their lives," he said. "It keeps informing me — the more I think I know, the more it tells me I need to know."

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