

MAGAZINE DANCE

On the Rise: Vitolio Jeune

By Herbert Simpson
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Photo by Greg Barrett

Bare-legged in rehearsal gear, Vitolio Jeune is working hard as he runs through several pieces in a company studio for an upcoming tour of Garth Fagan Dance. Always intense, Jeune's sudden shifts in direction and startlingly high jumps carve shapes in the air. In *Hylozoic*, by Norwood Pennewell, the first company work not choreographed by Fagan, he lifts lead dancer Nicolette Depass and effortlessly holds her as the seconds slip by. And he attacks the movement in the solo he has been given fiercely, bringing to it a force and passion that's riveting.

Fagan has only praise for Jeune, now in his second year in the company. "Vitolio is a brilliant technical dancer, with great intelligence and a great gift for interpretation," he says. "He gets inside the dance and inhabits it."

Jeune's background won him almost as much attention as his technique when he appeared on *So You Think You Can Dance* in 2009. He grew up in Haiti, and came to dance despite many personal challenges. His mother died when he was 5, and he lived with his grandmother until she could no longer care for him, then went to an orphanage. As a teenager, he danced in the streets of Port-au-Prince to support himself and his grandmother, who by then was dying of cancer.

Eventually, Jeune, now 28, auditioned and won a scholarship to Artcho Danse, a contemporary troupe in Haiti. He lived in co-founder Jeanguy Saintus' home, and joined Artcho's Ayikodans Company, touring Haiti and abroad. "He taught me to believe in myself," says Jeune of Saintus.

Having gained confidence as a performer, Jeune, 22, applied to Miami's New World School of the Arts and won a full scholarship. "He was born to dance," says dance department dean Daniel Lewis. He notes that Jeune had several handicaps when he entered. He was older than the other students and had less formal training. Yet he stayed in class, learned to get along with others, and completed his degree.

When Garth Fagan came to set a work on New World School of the Arts in 2007, he was so impressed with Jeune that he offered him a place in the company. When Jeune graduated in 2009, he moved north to the company's home in Rochester, New York, to take classes at Fagan's studios. He joined the company officially in August as a soloist, but it took some study. Having danced works by Graham, Limón, and Ailey, he understood the difficulty of assimilating Fagan's style. "This technique isn't like ballet where you prepare to turn and jump," he says. "Everything surprises; it's so spontaneous. That was difficult to learn and make natural. You see the jump and go, 'Wow! How did he get up there?'"

The rehearsal breaks, then Jeune begins his signature solo, *Talking Drums*. Fagan says he's raised the technical level "to fit Vitolio's capabilities." At one point Jeune bumps across the stage in a full split on the ground, then all at once rises straight into a held balance, reaching impossibly upward—it's Caliban shifting in a second into Apollo. The other dancers applaud at the conclusion.

Natalie Rogers-Cropper, head of the company school, first saw Jeune when she assisted Fagan at New World School of the Arts. "There are not many dancers like Vitolio Jeune," she says. "Many people are too afraid to give more than 100 percent; he is not."

Teased about moving from semi-tropical Miami to the chilly reaches of northern New York State, and driving through snowstorms to rehearsals, Jeune says firmly, "I am exactly where I want to be." Asked what his dance dream would be, he says, "I'm living it."