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Photography by Petr Metlicka

Liem Nguyen, break dancer, in the *Urban Nut.*, 2004.

## Not Your Mother's Nutcracker

*Tony Williams and BalletRox Uproot a Classic*

BY CHRISTINA LEONARD AND ARI KRISTAN

The curtain opens to drummers framed by towering brick walls competing with the sound of traffic. Wails of sirens and a smorgasbord of people rush through city streets on Christmas Eve, while a bi-racial couple in a two-bedroom apartment decorates a small tree with their daughter, Clarice. As the performance continues, Tchaikovsky's music crashes against the laments of Duke Ellington's trumpet and spins into doo-wop. On stage, the magic of the theater is represented by dancers of every age and race executing moves culled from ballet, tap, hip-hop, jazz and pop.



**Tony Williams and a student-2004.**

Don't worry, the marquee didn't lie: You're at *The Nutcracker*, but this is the *Urban Nutcracker*, a version of the classic with a modern, multicultural twist. There are no affluent Victorian-era families with maids and footman waiting on them. There is, instead, something much more universal, more realistic—the glory of the holidays painted in every hue. Luckily for both the audience and the members of BalletRox dance company, this *Nutcracker* also offers incredible music, inspired choreography, and the vision and passion of founder and director Anthony Williams.

A former member of the Boston Ballet, Williams first envisioned *Urban Nutcracker* while teaching classes at Roxbury Community College. He decided to build the "United Nations" of dance companies, one that would reflect both his own bi-racial background and the diverse realities of American life.

"We have this multi-mix," Williams says. "Multi-national, multi-religion, straight and gay. I didn't make it that way, it's just the way it is, so let's express it through art and theater." In 1995, he created the nonprofit BalletRox youth-based dance company, which stages the show annually at the Strand Theatre, with a \$4,000 grant from the Boston Globe Foundation. He also founded and runs the for-profit Jamaica Plain School of Dance.

Williams, who was born in Naples, Italy to an African-American soldier and a young Italian woman, was raised in the Bromley

Heath housing project in Jamaica Plain and became the first African-American member of the Boston Ballet. He began dancing at the late age of 16 in classes at a Dorchester community center, where it became apparent that he had incredible natural talent. His experiences in the dance studio exposed him to lifestyles radically different from his rough neighborhood and inspired him to work towards greatness.

His initial distance from the discipline allowed Williams to begin dancing without any knowledge of gender stereotypes or any sense that his race might impede his progress. He received a scholarship and started his training with E. Virginia Williams, Boston Ballet's founder. "I was developing as a person and as a human being," Williams says. "It helped me move on quickly, and after nine months, I was dancing professionally."

Williams has danced principal roles with the Boston Ballet, Royal Winnipeg Ballet, National Ballet of Portugal, Boston Repertory Ballet and the Norwegian National Ballet. He was a company member of the Joffrey Ballet, where he discovered that diversity was present, at least in terms of sexuality. He found a cast where "50 percent [were] gay and 50 percent straight" and skin color didn't matter as much as talent.

When his professional career was over, Tony's friends and company members encouraged him to "go back to teach the kids who are like you." That is exactly what he did. Through BalletRox and other local initiatives, Williams strives to offer youth an opportunity to dance and connect artistically in an urban setting where the problem is not a lack of creativity, but a lack of space for it to flourish.

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His natural talent mixed with his kind-hearted nature have made Tony a successful and reward-driven teacher, choreographer and mentor. He overcame often restrictive stereotypes of men in ballet with grace. "Straight guys are creative too, but that's the little-known secret that society isn't aware of," Williams says.

BalletRox has radically redefined what ballet traditionally represents. The form has long inhabited a world of privilege and whiteness, where black and Hispanic dancers have been relegated to a few, tightly proscribed roles. In *Urban Nutcracker*, Williams uproots ballet's focus on uniformity by incorporating a variety of American and African-American dance forms and adding some spice to the soundtrack. However, he has incorporated elaborate ballet scenes

into the production, demonstrating a deep respect for the techniques of traditional ballet. The result is the transformation of Tchaikovsky's holiday classic into something surprising, real, and just as strikingly magical as the original.

Tony Williams' appreciation for the creativity and passion of urban youths has driven him to create an artistic nation on his own soil. "I look like them, I am one of them," he says. With persistence and vision he has succeeded in building a creative community while patching the pieces that were broken in his. At the same time, he has produced an innovative and mystically beautiful dance extravaganza that opens the hearts and minds of its audience just as much as it opens the worlds of its performers. Not bad for a kid from the Jamaica Plain projects.

*The Urban Nutcracker* plays at the Strand Theatre (543 Columbia Road, Dorchester) on December 10 and 11 at 2 p.m.; December 17 at 2 and 7:30 p.m.; and December 18 at 2 p.m. For more information or to purchase tickets, check out [www.ticketweb.org](http://www.ticketweb.org) or call 866.468.7619. For more information about BalletRox, visit [www.balletrox.org](http://www.balletrox.org).

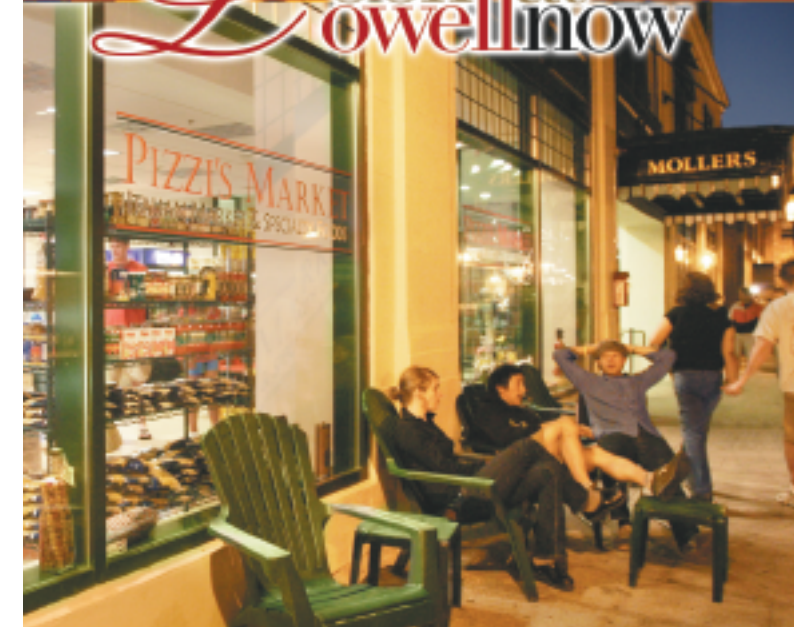


Photography by King Douglas

**Robert Steele and Tony Williams about 1972/3. Posing in Boston Ballet's Resident Choreographer-Sam Kurjian's Carmina Burana.**

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