

A “CREATIVE ALTRUIST”

Jarrell Hamilton shares her many talents with the community

By Dean M. Shapiro
Senior Editor



When Jarrell Hamilton first saw the expression “creative altruism” and the name of the originator of that expression, she enthusiastically adopted it as her personal mantra.

“It really resonated with me when I read an article about Dr. Martin Luther King and what he meant by it,” Jarrell explained. “The way he described it, ‘creative altruism’ means using your craft or your artistry to benefit the social well-being of others and that’s what I do.”

A multitalented, award-winning, 35-year-old native New Orleanian whose skills encompass dancing, choreographing, singing, acting, writing and film directing, Jarrell is also an educator and a mentor to other budding artists. She takes pride and pleasure in sharing her skills with others and passing those gifts on to those who work with her on a wide variety of creative projects and endeavors.

And, taking her mission a step further, she also founded, SparkNOLA, a nonprofit organization that offers up to \$1,000 in grants to other individuals who show a propensity toward artistic excellence.

“So for me, when I choreograph, act, sing or create in general, I also educate,” Jarrell elaborated. “My life’s work is creative altruism. I am figuring out how this is going to advance people; how it’s going to elevate human consciousness and humanity as a whole? This is what Dr. King was referring to. His quote really stood out and spoke to me.”

Along her artistic journey, Jarrell has worked closely with such renowned

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icons as singer/songwriter/actor Alicia Keys and titans in the field of professional dance. They include Ronald K. Brown; Robert Battle, Artistic Director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater; Jawole Willa Jo Zollar of Urban Bush Women and Arthur Mitchell who founded the prestigious Dance Theatre of Harlem and was a protégé of George Balanchine. Locally she has performed with and choreographed for numerous New Orleans-based dance troupes, including her own De La Soul Dance Company.

As an actor, she has appeared onstage in rave-reviewed musical and theatrical productions, most recently in the key role of Odette in Le Petit Theatre's presentation of Marcus Gardley's "The House That Will Not Stand."

Reflecting on what has already been an eventful career with undoubtedly much more to come, Jarrell noted, "When I look back in hindsight, I've always been super creative and I've always worn a lot of hats, even when I was young. It actually started out with me writing and doing poetry. And then I went from poetry to piano and then from piano into dance and acting and singing in the choir. When I was in elementary school I delved into anything that was creative.

"And so, as I got older, it became more about dance," Jarrell continued. "Dance

was definitely at the forefront of everything I did but I always had an affinity for acting, theatre, singing, choreographing and all the rest."

Raised in New Orleans East, Jarrell fondly recalls receiving a toy piano for Christmas when she was around 9 years old. "The way that little piano was designed, it would light up when you played it. And so I must have sat there for about two hours and played on it. I loved it and soon after that I started taking piano lessons."

Jarrell is quick to credit her parents, the late Rhett Anthony Hamilton Sr. and Sheila Simon Hamilton, for recognizing and respecting her creative talents. "They were extremely supportive," she said. "They allowed me to be who I wanted to be and that meant if I wanted to do piano, sing, dance, create, write or whatever else, they were heavily involved. They raised me to be a classy, cultured woman and it's been really good."

From elementary school, Jarrell went on to spend half-days at McDonogh 35 High School and the other half-days at the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts. While at NOCCA she studied under one of the most influential mentors of her younger years, the late Miguel Lopez, chair of the school's dance department. "He definitely made things happen for

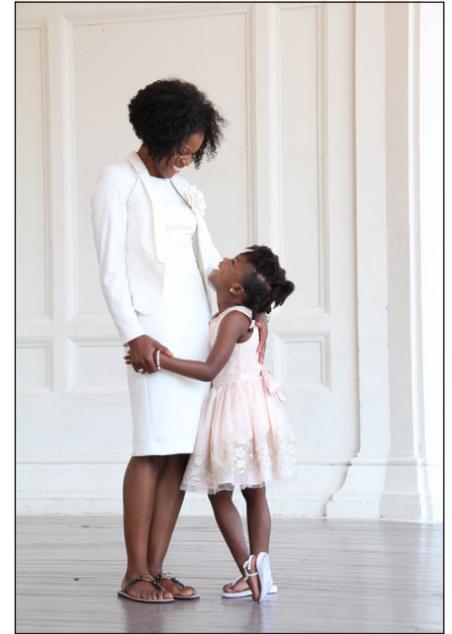


PHOTO CREDIT: CARLTON MICKLE

me. He steered me and a couple of other students along our journeys," Jarrell said.

Jarrell enrolled at Southern Methodist University in Dallas and furthered her dance education with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. She then double-majored at Tulane University, receiving her Masters in Fine Arts in Choreography and African American Studies, two disciplines she would later incorporate into many of the 30-plus dances she designed.

After college Jarrell went on to attend the Urban Bush Women's Summer Leadership Institute and did a choreographic residency with them. She also did performances and choreographic research at the American Dance Festival and the prestigious Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Massachusetts. Local venues where she has performed include the Ashé Cultural Arts Center. She has traveled to Cuba to participate in the "Evolve Diaspora" event and she hopes to eventually travel to Africa and add to her already-vast wealth of cultural knowledge.

And so, with all her talent and artistic gifts, Jarrell is asked what advice she would offer those who hope to pursue careers in creative fields. Her immediate response is, "Find a mentor. Find someone



2018 EPISODES: "Watermelon Dreams" performance installation, Choreographed and Directed by Jarrell Hamilton PHOTO CREDIT: DIOGO DE LIMA



De La SouL Dancers: Millinique Brown, Joshua Bell, Tyson Randolph PHOTOS BY ALI SLATKIN

to coach you through your creative trajectory and journey and keep it going. If you are sowing good seeds something good is going to flow from that.”

Jarrell also advises those she teaches and mentors to “explore different areas of creativity. You need to have to have a multitude of skill sets. You cannot be a one-trick pony. You have to expand your repertoire with the times. Adapt it to the digital age.”

Elaborating further, she said, “When I hear people say ‘Jack of all trades and master of none,’ I don’t believe it. I think that’s a lie. Miguel Lopez always told us, ‘Be a diverse dancer. Be versatile in classical, modern, hip hop and different forms

of dance movement. Be open and keep your arsenal of artistic capabilities fresh.”

And, as one might expect from someone as creative as Jarrell, the acorn she dropped didn’t fall far from the tree. Her 9-year-old daughter Leanna, she proudly noted, “is aimed toward singing, dancing, acting and fashion. She just naturally falls into it and she loves it and she’s doing it.

“She’s learning a lot from me, Jarrell continued, adding that Leanna is taking piano lessons and recently had a role in a film for which Jarrell was assistant director. “So, yeah, she’s getting her feet wet in the business already.”

Wrapping up her story of multiple accomplishments, positive philosophies

and healthy advice for others, Jarrell fondly reflects on what she calls “My blessings.” I’m always in the flow and the cycle of the next project and the next vision that the Divine Creator has given to me. So when I think about the masters who I’ve worked with and learned from, I feel incredibly blessed to be able to give back to others what I’ve learned along the way.”

You can follow Jarrell on social media or visit her website, <https://www.jarrellhamilton.com> for information about De La Soul Dance Company, virtual masterclasses, E-courses and more. Applications for the next round of SparkNOLA grants will be taken over her website starting in November and running through January 2023.