

DANCE[®] magazine

Adj CISSOKO

The Spirit and
Soul of LINES'
Enchanting Muse

XTREME XTENSION

W BALLET
CAME OBSESSED
H HIGH LEGS

RE-SHOW NOOZE

Y YOU SHOULD BE
PPING BACKSTAGE

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K FACTORS,
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W TO KEEP YOURS
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The Best of 2018

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THE DANCE MAGAZINE AWARDS



Adji Cissoko has the alchemical blend of willowy limbs and earthy musicality you expect from a dancer in Alonzo King LINES Ballet. But she also has something more—a joy in dancing that makes every step feel immediate. “She has this soulful quality of an ancient spirit coming through her body,” says LINES chief executive officer Muriel Maffre, a former prima ballerina with San Francisco Ballet. “She’s fearless, which is fun to work with,” says artistic director Alonzo King. “I don’t know how to put it into words—she’s herself.”

Yet as natural as she is in King’s choreography, she’s never lost her love for classical ballet. So much so that when she had some time off last summer, she reached out to her previous company, National Ballet of Canada, and performed in the corps of *Swan Lake*. Artistic director Karen Kain didn’t hesitate to put her back on the stage. ▶

The soulfulness of an ancient spirit. The fearlessness of a young dreamer.

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“Adjji is one of the most beautiful, accomplished and thoughtful dancers I have experienced working with,” says Kain, who first spotted Cissoko when she was 17 at the 2009 Prix de Lausanne, and hired her in 2010. Turning back into a swan showed Cissoko how much she’d grown, yet also confirmed her love of dancing in two balletic worlds. “It was a reminder—that is also beautiful, just in a different way,” she says.

Cissoko started training in Vaganova technique while growing up in Munich, where her German mother and Senegalese father still live. She left Germany at 18 to attend a summer program at the School of American Ballet and a final year of training at American Ballet Theatre’s Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School. After graduation, she turned down offers from Boston Ballet II, Dresden Semperoper Ballett and The Washington Ballet, and chose NBoC for its wide-ranging repertoire.

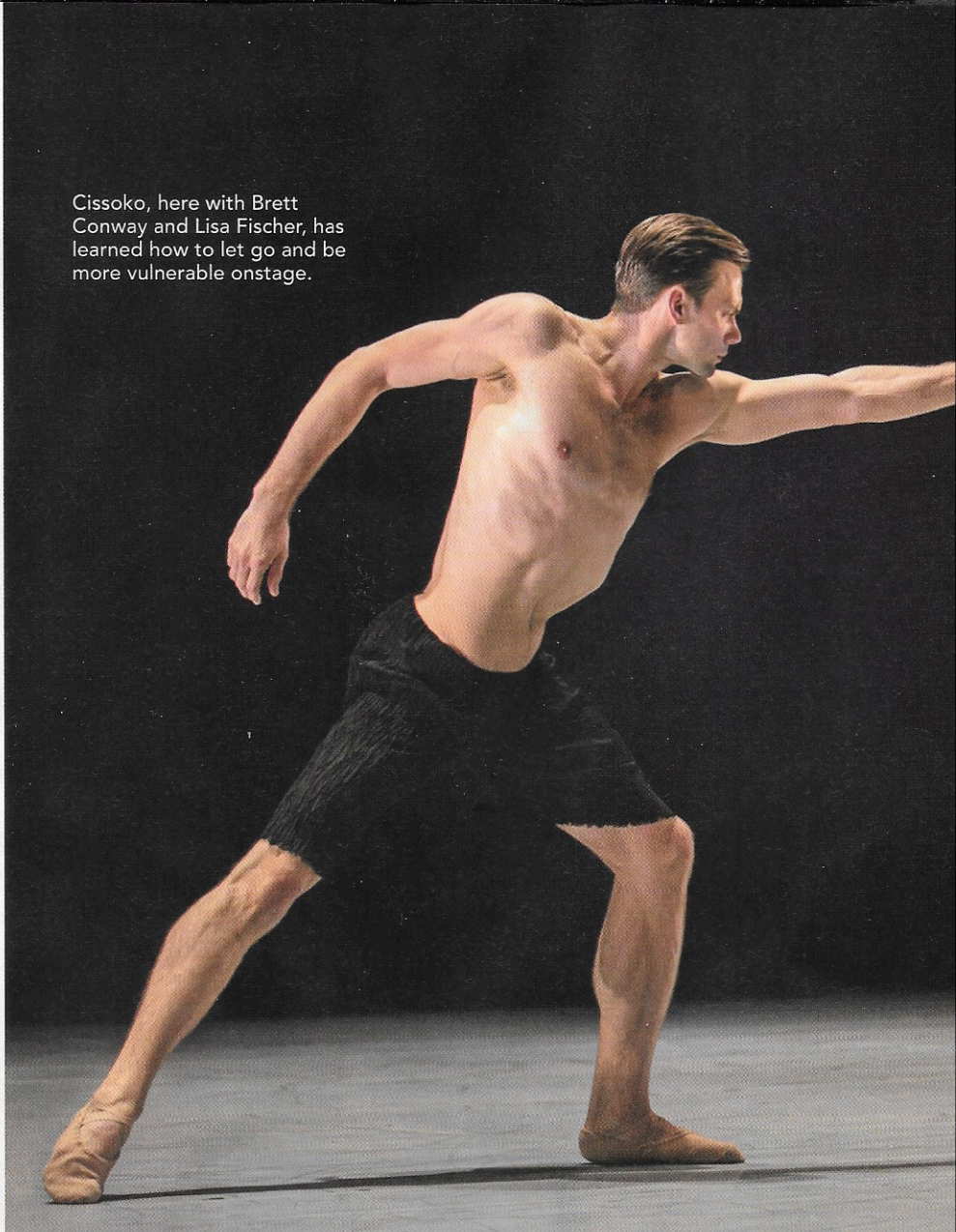
But at 5' 10" she was the corps' tallest woman, and in classics like *Swan Lake*, she says, “I had to cut my movements short, just to fit in.” She got a taste of more expressive freedom in soloist roles in ballets like Sir Kenneth MacMillan’s *Elite Syncopations* and in contemporary works like Wayne McGregor’s *Chroma*. “But then I had to spend most of my time in the corps, being like everybody else when I wasn’t like everybody else,” Cissoko says.

After three seasons, Cissoko brought up her concerns. “Karen and I were actually on the same page,” she says. “She was like, ‘You need somebody who choreographs on you, who can really use what you have.’” Kain encouraged her to consider LINES.

In fact, Cissoko had already auditioned there during her year at JKO, after people told her she looked like she belonged in LINES. “I had no idea what it was,” she admits. An unranked company of about a dozen expressive, ballet-trained and tall dancers—the company currently ranges from 5' 10" to 6' 4" —LINES was a place where Cissoko could fit in. At that first audition, though, she wasn’t yet ready for King’s choreographic process, which relies heavily on improv and dancer input. “In the classical world you don’t really improv,” Cissoko says. “I couldn’t let myself go.”

With three years of maturity and performance experience under her belt—plus a recommendation from Kain—Cissoko tried again. “In my audition, Alonzo said, ‘Please spell your name dancing.’ I was like, ‘What?’ But then I had so much fun,” she says. “You don’t prepare, you don’t think, you’re in the moment and you see what comes out.”

Cissoko, here with Brett Conway and Lisa Fischer, has learned how to let go and be more vulnerable onstage.



Ballet BFFs

Madeline DeVries joined LINES just two months after Cissoko, and the friends have been inseparable ever since. “We’re super-big dorks,” DeVries says. Known by the celebrity-supercouple name “Madji,” they room together on tour, share clothes and log their adventures on Instagram as @madjiveverywhere.

Cissoko and DeVries on tour in Paris





Celebrating 35 Seasons of LINES

Choreographer Alonzo King founded LINES Ballet in San Francisco in 1982, envisioning a new kind of ballet—one that respected the foundations he learned at the School of American Ballet, Harkness, The Ailey School and American Ballet Theatre, yet promoted equality and emphasized the dancers' personal expression. "I always thought the balletic language for men was so limited," he says. "And I felt that women were not being allowed to have the full range of their voice."

Thirty-five seasons later, Alonzo King LINES Ballet is beloved around the world, touring 15 to 20 weeks a year. It's also become a multifaceted brand that encompasses their Dance Center, which offers 75 weekly classes; the LINES Ballet BFA at Dominican University of California; community-outreach programs and more.

The company's celebratory season has spanned two world premieres: *Sutra*, King's collaboration with tabla master Zakir Hussain, and *Common Ground*, a collaboration with the Kronos Quartet. An immersive multimedia exhibition *Through-LINES: The Art of Ballet* runs at San Francisco's 836M gallery through early January 2019.

King and CEO Muriel Maffre have also begun actively brainstorming about how best to curate his legacy. "We've learned from what has happened with major choreographers coming to the end of their career," Maffre says.

For the foreseeable future, King will remain deeply engaged in his art. "Thirty-five years, it's a marker," he says. "In another way it's still in the now, trying to do more and better."

King saw a new confidence, and sensed that she was ready to dive into his deeply collaborative artistry. Joining LINES meant Cissoko had to potentially give up one of her closest-held dreams: someday dancing *Odette/Odile*. But, she says, "I didn't know everything that was in me until I joined LINES. I realized I had never really moved."

Working with King has tapped Cissoko's creativity. In one of her earliest performances, King cast her in a fully improvised solo in *Constellation*. "Me thinking I'm going to be extra-smart, I created this whole idea of what I was going to do," she says. "After the first show, he said, 'What was that? That was not improv.'" The next evening, she dared herself to let go of any strategy. "And then something incredible happened, because I had to listen to my body, instead of listening to my mind."

Cissoko's willingness to try anything makes her an ideal LINES dancer, says Michael Montgomery, her frequent partner. "People that are super-talented run the risk of relying on their abilities, but she's always striving for more," he says. He admires her goofy warmth and habit of making up songs. "We always joke that we're coming up on a Christmas album," he says.

The company's extensive touring satisfies Cissoko's wanderlust and also lets her use her fluent French, English and German and conversational Spanish. Her basic Senegalese came in handy on a trip there this June with former LINES dancer Courtney Henry. She and Henry have also created a dance film using songs written by Cissoko's father, a musician who plays the lute-like kora instrument. "That was the first time I really realized, my dad is what I am—we are both artists," Cissoko says.

Odette/Odile is now equaled by LINES works like *Writing Ground*, in which she dances the beginning of the piece with her eyes closed, surrounded by four male dancers. "I didn't know that was my dream role until I got it," she says. "You fall, and you feel vulnerable, but you know the guys have you. It is so real."

She still maintains her classical chops by donning pointe shoes for company class. She also guests with companies like the New Chamber Ballet and performs at events like the Monterrey International Ballet Gala in Mexico.

Ultimately, dancing in two worlds has shaped her as an artist and a person. "When I came to LINES, it was a reminder that there is so much more," she says. "Not just in the movement, but in *life*." ■

Claudia Bauer writes on dance in San Francisco.