

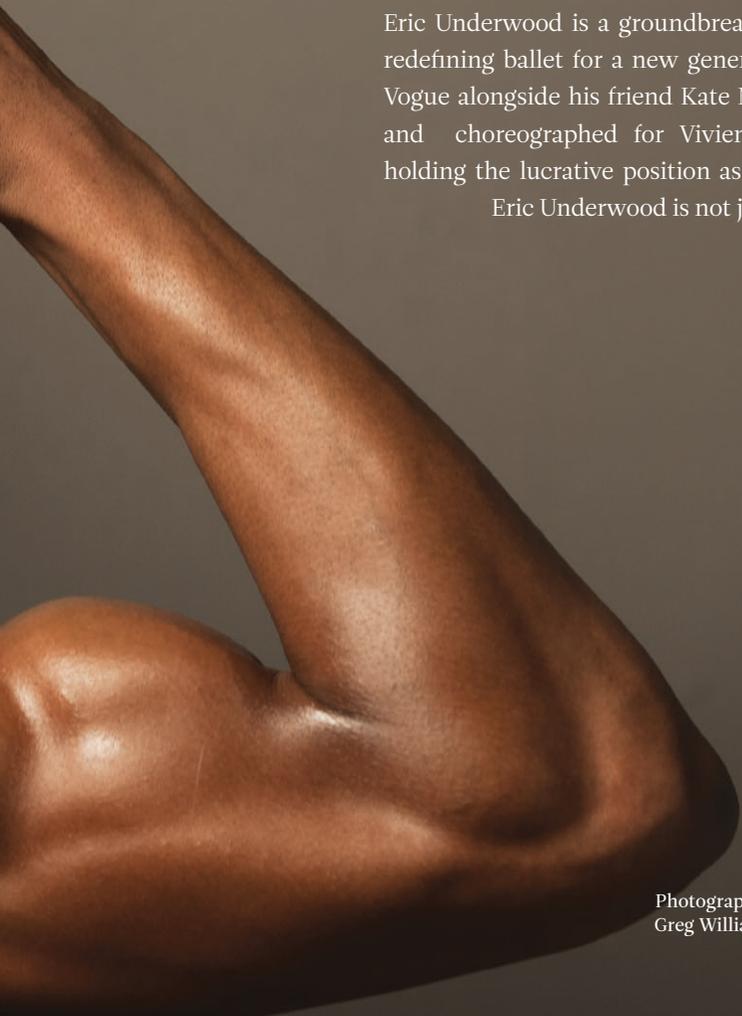


NOT JUST A PRETTY FACE

ERIC UNDERWOOD

Eric Underwood is a groundbreaking force that is currently redefining ballet for a new generation. He has modelled for Vogue alongside his friend Kate Moss, danced with Beyonce and choreographed for Vivienne Westwood whilst also holding the lucrative position as Soloist of The Royal Ballet.

Eric Underwood is not just a pretty face...



Photographer
Greg Williams

At just 14-years-old, Eric broke free from a life that was not meant to be. He grew up in the projects just outside of Washington DC, in a neighbourhood rife with gun crime. His mother had other ideas for her son; she suggested that he pursue acting and arranged an audition at a local performing arts school.

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Eric failed the acting audition, but he refused to let it be. As he walked down a corridor towards the exit, he walked past a room where dance auditions were commencing. Eric saw an opportunity, he walked in and demanded to be considered despite having no experience whatsoever.

Eric laughed heartily as he recalled his fearless attitude which can only come from the young. He recalled: “I told them, if you show me, I can do it. In reality, I had absolutely no idea what was going on.”

He laughed again in disbelief, then added: “I just started moving around. They checked my flexibility and my ability to jump and then decided to give me a shot.”

Eric admitted that when he first entered the world of dance, he had absolutely no sense of direction but knew that ballet was the opportunity he needed to change his life. Within six months, Eric had moved to New York City to attend the prestigious School of American Ballet.

He said passionately: “Most dancers start ballet at around 3-years-old, but I love that I was introduced to it at 14-years-old. I had a deeper understanding of it and what was right and wrong. That’s what is so amazing about ballet; there are no grey areas.”

In the past, ballet has come under fire for not embracing diversity, especially regarding

gender and ethnicity. Eric confessed that it wasn’t something he was hyper-aware of.

Eric said nonchalantly: “At lots of times in my life, I have been the only boy or the only African American in my class. I have always been the only other thing!”

Eric laughed knowingly, then added frankly: “Being male has never hindered my success in this industry. It’s just a question of ignorance; people are just so unaware. If the girls are dancing, someone is lifting them.”

He continued: “If people have problems with race, that is their problem, not mine. I’m not going to be responsible for other people’s problems. I’ve always been black, so I’ve never thought anything of it.”

Eric radiates a warmth that is instantly endearing and his insistence on normality has worked well with his personal mission to demythologise the elitist reputation of ballet. Eric said: “This is a tough industry, you have to be incredibly strong mentally, and you have to love dance. You can’t pursue a career in dance without love because there’s far too much discipline and sacrifice.”

Eric’s voice was heavy with emotion; he said: “Nothing can prepare you for how incredibly competitive this industry is but when you truly love your craft you don’t even notice anyone else. As a child I was unaware, I went home and practiced and practiced. I was obsessed with improving; I wasn’t worried about what anyone else was doing.”

He added: “You have to be very thick-skinned and be able to take a lot of rejection. To succeed in this industry, you need impenetrable inner-strength to keep forward no matter what is thrown your way.”

Eric has danced leads in some of ballet’s most prestigious productions, including; *Swan Lake*, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and





the role of Tybalt in Kenneth MacMilan's Romeo and Juliet at the Royal Opera House.

Eric said: "My favourite performance to date was dancing Romeo in Romeo and Juliet at Teatro Massimo of Palermo. It was a magical experience that I'll never forget."

He added: "I'm human and nerves are inevitable. I try to get them all out of the way during rehearsals so that I can let go and be free on stage."

Eric managed to retain his composure even when he was invited to dance with Beyonce at the Jacobs Javits Center in New York.

Eric confessed that he fell in love with Beyonce on the spot. He professed passionately: "That was a cool experience, and I was paid well for a couple of hours work. Beyonce is a girl after my own heart; she's such a great mover and took to ballet really fast. I don't think she can do anything wrong!"

Not only has Eric conquered the world of ballet, but he has also transcended his talents to the fashion industry. He confessed that his love for ballet and fashion is equal, but the balance between two of the most competitive industries in the world is a precarious one.

Eric recently modelled alongside his friend, iconic British supermodel Kate Moss for Vogue Italia. The shoot was photographed by none other than fashion royalty Mario Testino.

He said excitedly: "I've never learned more on a shoot than with Kate Moss. She knew every angle; she really is the best of the best. Kate and Mario were amazing to watch, the connection they had was incredible to see."

This was not Eric's first foray into working alongside fashion's elite. He has been photographed by iconic photographer David Bailey, choreographed for Kate Spade and Vivienne Westwood's Climate Revolution x Anglomania film.

Speaking of Vivienne Westwood's film, he said: "It was such an honour to be part of the project. It gave me the opportunity to combine my love and experience in the fashion industry with my experience in ballet. To use that knowledge to raise awareness for such an important cause such as climate change is incredible."

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Eric Underwood is an inspiration to many. He has achieved phenomenal success across a multitude of industries. He has become the face of ballet for a new generation, encouraging diversity in a historically elitist profession.

He explained: "All things need to be relatable. Ballet needs to become as acceptable as football, basketball or baseball. It would make children a lot more inclined to want to do it. There are so many stereotypes surrounding ballet, but it's no different from any other form of dance. Children do hip-hop or tap; it is all the same."

Eric believes that the secret to success is never looking back or staying still. He revealed: "It's great to celebrate accomplishments, but I try to not focus too much on what I've done or where I've been. It's all about pushing yourself to the best of your ability. I don't believe in the word 'no'. I find a way around the word 'no'. Give everything a go and make sure you are giving 100% when you do."

 @EricUnderwood

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