

## Alvin Ailey

Alvin Ailey bestrides the Black dance scene as a figure who has presented it on a scale and with a seriousness that matches the achievements of many white companies. But perhaps his greatest importance lies in having created a synthesis between black and white dance forms that reveals the possibility of a happy coexistence in which one can gain strength from the other: Black themes are presented within the disciplines of white movement vocabularies. Black vitality and unique rhythmic moves contribute to white formal structures. When you add it all up, you are presented with a splendid dance theater.

Ailey was born in Rogers, Texas in 1931. He moved to Los Angeles during his youth. While attending Jefferson High School, Ailey had an opportunity to see a performance by the Katherine Dunham Company. Ailey recalled, "I was completely hooked from the moment I saw those beautiful black dancers doing dances taken from all over the world....".(1) Ailey participated in athletics before graduating from Jefferson in 1948. He enrolled in UCLA to study Romance Language, but transferred to Los Angeles City College soon after. In 1951, he left to go San Francisco State College. Two years earlier he had made the acquaintance of the Lester Horton Dance Company. Horton organized the first multi-racial modern dance company in the U.S. Ailey served on the stage crew when a young dancer named Carmen de Lavallade was giving her first performance.(2) He made his debut as a dancer with the company in 1953, appearing in a revue entitled *Bel Caribe*. Horton died that same year and Ailey briefly took over the direction of the company.

1954 was a very important year for Alvin Ailey; he was invited to perform at the Jacob's Pillow Festival in Lee, Massachusetts. He also danced in the film *Carmen Jones*, and danced in a black updating of Bizet's opera *Carmen* starring Dorothy Dandridge, Harry Belafonte and Pearl Bailey. Herbert Ross, the choreographer of *Carmen Jones*, invited Ailey and Carmen de Lavallade to appear in his next production of *Flowers*, opening on Broadway at the end of the year. (3)

Despite an attractive score book by Truman Capote and décor by Oliver Messel, the musical only ran for four months. Ailey, however, made great use of his stay in New York. He continued his dance training with such major innovators as Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey, Anna Sokolow, and Karel Shook.

During the years 1954 to 1958, Ailey danced in several musicals on and off Broadway, including *The Carefree Tree*, Harry Belafonte's *Sing, Man Sing* in which he partnered Mary Hinkson, one of Martha Graham's most prominent soloists, and he was the leading dancer in *Jamaica* which starred Lena Horne. During these years he also danced with Anna Sokolow, Sophie Maslow and his contemporary Donald McKayle. In March of 1958, Ailey and Ernest Parham presented a concert appearance in N.Y.C. Talley Beatty was featured as the guest artist. Doris Hering wrote, "As a Dancer, Mr. Ailey is exceptional. He reminds one of a caged lion full of lashing power that he can contain or release at will."(4)

Of Ailey the dancer, Arthur Todd wrote, "Mr. Ailey has mastered all the technique and virtuosity one could wish. He moves with a personal magnificence that is breathtaking and, for many, is the greatest male dancer in his field today."(5)

Critic John Martin wrote, “..he is strikingly handsome, with genuine theater artist’s inborn power of projection. His technique is strong and his quality of movement is notably beautiful, like that of a svelte nervously alert animal.”(6)

The praise Ailey received as a dancer has been extended to his company, The Alvin Ailey Dance Theater. The company has rapidly established itself as one of the most important American modern dance companies in existence. The company, while integrated, is composed of primarily black dancers with a repertoire reflecting black themes. “I feel an obligation to use black dancers because there must be more opportunities for them but not because I’m a black choreographer talking to black people,” says Ailey. (7)

Ailey’s choreography has ranged as widely as his own training and abilities, with many of his works becoming modern classics. Apart from what is usually described, Ailey has rarely used the more immediately recognizable black dance forms. In the same way that he moved away from the traditional all-black company, his choreography has parted from his prescribed thematic material. Frequently his works developed from pure movement and even in his works based on “Negro material”, the theme has usually served only as a base while the movement is quite abstract. Even one of Ailey’s most enduring works, *Revelations*, which is based on negro spirituals, is more abstract in movement, although the music itself and the intensity of the rhythmic force with which it is always interpreted provided an atmosphere associated with Afro-American lifestyles. Even so, *Revelations* achieves a universal expression of the spirit of mankind. The critic Clive Barnes states, “What Ailey achieves in *Revelations* is a dance statement about faith and the spirit of man.”(8)

Ailey's eclectic choice of styles has included several pure jazz works, such as *Blues Suite*, *Roots of the Blues*, and *Night Creatures*. His most recent jazz piece is *For Bird With Love*, to music by Charles "Bird" Parter, Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, and Jerome Kern.

Two of Ailey's most prominent dancers, Judith Jamison and Dudley Williams, inspired two wonderful solos: *Cry*, for Jamison, is a work dedicated to an about the fortitude of black women, especially our mothers; and *Love Songs*, for Williams, revealed a number of emotions from physical passion to fear and pathos. *Cry*, considered one of Ailey's finest pieces, was described by Joseph Mazo: "The dancer of *Cry* begins by unwinding her headband and using it as a rag with which to scrub floors; she contracts in pain; she flutters her hands like captive birds; she sinks to earth and then she rises and, with short, strong steps and ecstatically raised arms, dances freely off the stage, toward freedom."(9) In addition to a huge canon of works created for his own company, Ailey has choreographed for the ABT, the Joffrey Ballet, the Paris Opera Ballet, London Festival Ballet and the Royal Danish Ballet.

It has been Ailey's policy to invite many choreographers to create for his company, including Talley Beatty, Jennifer Muller, Judith Jamison, Donald McKayle and Ulysses Dove. He does this to insure a wide appeal to audiences and obviate the danger of the company becoming merely a working museum for Ailey choreography when he is no longer there.

Since its creation in 1958, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has performed for an estimated number of over 15 million people in forty-eight states of America, forty-five countries and on six continents. The company's extensive touring began in 1962

with a tour to the Far East, Southeast Asia and Australia. Since then there have been more than twenty-five international tours, the most spectacularly successful being the tour of Russia in 1970 – the first American modern dance company to visit the USSR since the days of Isadore Duncan.

The Alvin Ailey Dance Theater Foundation administers the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center at 1515 Broadway, New York, a school for dance training, as well as the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble.

Alvin Ailey has emerged as one of the primary leaders in American dance. His contributions to dance lie in the fact that he is first and foremost a creative artist. It is his blending of the black heritage with the modern dance that results in his greatness.

It is clear that, far from being a choreographer who deals only with fold material – in this case dance and music for the American negro – Alvin Ailey must be recognized simply as a major creative artist of our time.(10)

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