

The New York Times

Special Sunday Insert: Perpetual Motion

By: Zadie Smith & Misty Copeland

April 14, 2019

SUNDAY, APRIL 14, 2019

The New York Times



MISTY COPELAND and ZADIE SMITH on dance

PERPETUAL MOTION

The photographs in this section are from The New York Times archives, which consist of some six million prints — some dating back more than 100 years. The Past Tense storytelling team chose the images from thousands of dance photos and commissioned commentary from the ballerina Misty Copeland (Pages 8-13, 44-49) and an essay from the writer Zadie Smith (Pages 28-29). Additional pictures from The Times's archives are published every day on Instagram @nytarchives.

15



JACK MITCHELL/ALVIN AILEY DANCE FOUNDATION AND SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

APRIL BERRY IN ALVIN AILEY'S "THE MAGIC OF KATHERINE DUNHAM," 1987.



UPLIFT!

By ZADIE SMITH

When I was about 12, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater came to town and my mother took me to see them. It was a trip for just us two, and I was a little reluctant, suspecting some species of racial uplift, which I felt I could receive far more easily by staying in my room, listening to Monie Love and watching Cameo's "Word Up" video on repeat. I was suspicious of racial uplift in general. The way it always seemed to point in the same direction, toward the supposed "higher" arts: the theater but not the television, opera singers but not beatboxers, ballet dancers but not body-poppers. No Jamaican mother ever ran into a kid's bedroom, waving a cassette, crying: "Have you heard 'Push It'?" It's by some brilliant young ladies from New York!" Yet I couldn't imagine anything on the legitimate stage meaning as much to me as Salt-N-Pepa's bump and grind.

Off we went — and it was a rapture. Nothing prepares you for the totality of Alvin Ailey: the aural, visual, physical, spiritual beauty. Up to that point, most high-culture excursions (usually school trips) had felt like sly training for a lifetime of partly satisfying adult aesthetic experiences: nice singing but absurd story, or good acting but incomprehensi-

ble 400-year-old text, and so on. To be permitted to hear the thickly stacked, honeyed gospel of "Wade in the Water," while simultaneously watching those idealized, muscular arms — in every shade of brown — slowly rise and assume the shape of so many ancient amphoras! Heaven. And then below the regality and poise of the upper body, beneath the waist, there continued the bastardized bump and grind from MTV, coming full circle to meet its call-and-response West African roots. Everywhere you looked: sensory pleasure. In place of the saccharine costume confections of "The Nutcracker," here were down-home, flowing, church-white gowns, stunning against so much shining dark skin, and redolent of the American South, a dream place I'd visited only in books and song. It dawned on me that I was watching neither high nor low culture but rather a wholly unified thing.

Ailey's all-encompassing vocabulary included the athletes from the running tracks and the fly-girls from the videos, the swaying of church ministers and the hip-switching of Caribbean dance hall and carnival. A diaspora of movement, in short. All fingertips stretched to the sky, all leaps seemed weightless, the whole logic tended upward. "*Didn't my Lord deliver*

Daniel well?" asked the gospel choir, and then pushed the question further from the biblical to the political: "*Then why not every man?*" Deliverance. From shackles, from oppression, from stereotype and misidentification, from prejudice, from any form of restraint, even that proposed by gravity. Toward freedom. (I note that in the photo the minister is the only one encumbered with shoes.)

To me, all dance is a discourse on freedom, but in black dance, for obvious reasons, this discourse has been as much literal as figurative. Which fact makes it impossible not to see this photograph as history as much as choreography, although it is an image in which the "black body" is not solely a site of pain, suffering and exploitation — as it is often depicted today — but also the locus of an extraordinary joy. At the shimmering point at which archetypes ("the black body") become individuals and then icons, I spy, in this image of uplift, Bishop Richard Allen, Marsha Hunt and Joseph Cinque leaping into history, or the Rev. Al Green, Lauryn Hill and Bill T. Jones ascending toward the sublime. And each spring, now that I live in New York, I don't have to go very far at all to get another shot of Ailey's soaring delights.

DON REILLY, AMY KARINE PLANTADIT AND IIRI SANDS, ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER, 1996.

AFTERWORD

Six months ago, the newly formed Past Tense team began sifting through the treasure chest that is the New York Times archives, where some six million photographs are filed away. Photographs of dance quickly emerged as one of the most enduring themes, with photos that date back more than 100 years. Most of those photos are of ordinary people, and that's what we've highlighted here: from slow dances to the Twist, from the mambo to the mosh pit. Choreographers and professional dancers, like our guest editor, Misty Copeland, are scattered throughout, in part because it's in them that we find not just the highest elevation of the form, but a metaphor for possibility that extends far beyond the realm of dance. In her essay here, the novelist Zadie Smith remembers a performance by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater from her childhood as nothing less than "a ravishment." Oprah Winfrey, talking to The Times about Ailey's company in 1996, said much the same: "It makes us feel better about ourselves, that you can live better, that you can fly." This section is devoted to the world of dancers, both off and onstage, who help keep alive that dream of flight.

VERONICA CHAMBERS, *editor, Past Tense*

George Balanchine

The choreographer George Balanchine built a legacy at New York City Ballet and was among those who made New York a ballet capital. PAGE 7

Public School Students

This photo of New York City schoolchildren was taken in 1987 by The Times photojournalist Dith Pran, whose life under the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia inspired the film "The Killing Fields." PAGE 11

At Baby Grand

In a 1965 article headlined "Harlem at Night: Slumming Passe," one "inveterate white Harlem-goer" was quoted as saying: "It's a matter of curiosity. I go up because it's ridiculous to be living in New York and not go to Harlem. It's the vigor of the place, the vibrance, that gets you." PAGE 14

April Berry

In 1987, The New York Times's chief dance critic, Anna Kisselgoff, wrote that this tribute to Katherine Dunham was "one of Alvin Ailey's most inspired ideas." PAGE 15

Martha Graham and Her Company

Standing to the right of the famed choreographer Martha Graham is the ballerina Sallie Wilson. In 1979, the Times dance critic Jennifer Dunning wrote, "In her quiet way, Sallie Wilson, a principal dancer with the American Ballet Theater, has etched herself indelibly on the consciousness of the New York balletgoing public." PAGE 17

At Ipanema

Alfonso A. Narvaez wrote in a 1975 article, "At the moment, the dance is the hustle and the Latin music is salsa (Spanish for sauce or gravy), which, depending on the cynicism of the observer, is either a brand new sound or a brand new name for music that has been around for years." PAGE 20

El Avram

In 1967, a Times reporter wrote, "El Avram is a downstairs bouillabaisse of Mediterranean condiments — an Israeli owner, an Armenian oud player, an Israeli-Arab chef in the kitchen and Greek, Italian, Spanish and French music in the air." PAGE 32

Miss Ruth School of Dance

This photo was taken by Bill Cunningham, whose writing was as artful as his photographs. "It is a rite of spring (and sometimes early summer), choreographed not by Balanchine but by parents and children and teachers in dance schools all across the country. It is the night of the annual dance concert." PAGE 36

Nell's

In an interview for a story about the nightclub Nell's, the Village Voice columnist Michael Musto told the Times: "I've been amazed for years that it has stayed open. It's just always there, sort of like Mount Everest." PAGE 38

Anthrax Concert

In 1993, in the story accompanying this photo, the Times Magazine reported: "It's strictly skin on skin: torsos slam into one another, chests collide, heads recoil, noses bleed; clothing is ripped off, trampled underfoot, forgotten; bodies fall and disappear, sucked into the sweaty undertow. Occasionally a warrior is tossed above the crush and passed along from hand to hand. It's unspeakably hot, often painful, certainly claustrophobic — all in all, just another night in the mosh pit." PAGE 41