



Dancer Vernard Gilmore 'Reflects' on Alvin Ailey, dance, his own feelings

By: Andrew Davis

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Twenty-five years is a long time to be involved in any discipline. Now imagine having to be in prime physical shape all that time—on the level of an elite athlete.

Vernard Gilmore, who grew up in Chicago, has been with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for a quarter-century. He began his training at Curie Performing and Creative Arts High School before studying at the Joseph Holmes Chicago Dance Theater and then moving to New York City. Gilmore is currently featured in Alvin Ailey's solo "Reflections in D" and takes center stage in other classics such as Revelations and Blues Suite. Gilmore, who's openly gay, recently talked with Windy City Times about Alvin Ailey, the evolution of dance, the Ailey documentary and his own feelings during the past two years that have challenged everyone.

Windy City Times: You're from Chicago. Given the pandemic, how often do you make it back here?

Vernard Gilmore: The pandemic has taken a lot out of everyone. My [paternal] grandmother is still in Chicago and she's dealing with some health issues, so I've been back and forth for the past [few] months. Most of the time, I try to see my grandmother and spend time with her. Besides the time with the company, I'll try to get back to Chicago two or three more times this year.

WCT: Congratulations on your time with the company.

VG: It's been 25 years with the first company, but I've also been a student at the school [and] I was with the junior company for two years—it's been, like, 30 years with the actual foundation.

WCT: Obviously, the dance scene has changed a lot over the past 25 years. What's the biggest change you've observed at the company during that time—and what's been the biggest change you've seen in dance?

VG: Oh—that's a very interesting question to start with. [Laughs] Part of the genius of Alvin Ailey was that he brought the culture into the theater. With that seed planted in me, I understood that there were times when it would change. There was something important that Judy [legendary Artistic Director Emerita Judith Jamison] said: "Hold on to the past, live in the present and reach fearlessly into the future." That, to me, has been a pillar in my life. I understand that we have to grow and change, but you have to remember that you [need] a foundation—that that foundation involves a tenacity toward commitment in your life. You need to work toward perfection so you can achieve excellence.

How we communicate changes and how we want to communicate positively changes. I've watched that happen throughout the dance world. Sometimes it worries me because you can observe someone not working that hard—but maybe that person doesn't know how to work that hard; they may not have that "old-school" mentality. But you try to be an example—not just for the students at the Ailey company; I'm just trying to set an example.

You know, I was just talking to one of the very young male dancers in our company—a very bright man. I said, "I understand you have your own thing but sometimes you have to trust that the people who came before you [actually] know something." It was something people said to me when I was younger. You have to have a great foundation.

Young people today have everything at their fingertips. I remember those eight-tracks and cassettes... [Laughs] The things that are important to the young generation now are different. I feel like some of the stuff I want to keep to myself, but they want to put everything out there. Things are different—but it doesn't mean our values are not transcending. I tell younger people to have fun and work hard; don't do just the bare minimum; you need to focus on something.

Being from Chicago, I love sports. But there was a coach from Phoenix [Monty Williams] who said something that was a revelation to me. He said, "I'm not trying to call you out—I'm trying to call you up." THAT'S what a person needs to hear. I want to pull people up because I see the potential.

WCT: For our readers, can you describe what "Reflections in D" is?

VG: I got to watch the Ailey documentary twice to gain some perspective. As I think about how I've grown [while] performing "Reflections in D" the past couple years, he just really makes room for you to grow in it—and that I find absolutely incredible. Judy has a great ear for music, so there's this one rehearsal I watch of her giving to a young man; I watch it all the time because I learn something every time from the way she moves to the music, and it just makes it magical. You know that Mr. Ailey and Mr. [Duke] Ellington had a great relationship. Could you imagine growing up in that time? So, this solo—"Reflections in D"—is an ode to Mr. Ellington's music. It's like he wanted to bring the music alive through the language of dance. It's quiet and not very long; it's like this perfect little boutique of art.

So many people have gotten to dance to it and each person has a different interpretation. That's a lovely thing about it. And I've been able to teach it, also! I'm overjoyed about that—I'm teaching an Ailey solo to the Ailey men. It's amazing to share my experiences with them.

WCT: What's your take on the Ailey documentary?

VG: I thought it was the first time in my 20-plus years with the company that I had seen a very honest portrayal of Ailey. His love life, his life outside of dance—it was very rarely talked about. There had a very conservative way of talking about him and his passing. This documentary talks about him getting sick, falling in love, being lonely and his influence in dance—but no one had really been invited to his house. Not judging him, but it seemed like he was trying to survive, too. And listening to his voice was ... resonating. He seemed to make everyone feel comfortable. I felt like I got to see that side of him—and I learned that he wanted truth in his movement. To see him come through some very hard times and still show his excellence is something you can always take with you.

WCT: I've asked a variety of people this next question, and have gotten a variety of answers. Over the past couple years, we've all had time to self-reflect. We're dealing with the pandemic but there's also the racial awakening that some people have had. What have you learned about yourself during this time?

VG: That I'm angry and hurt most of the time. I'm mistrustful with everything and everyone. It's a hard time. You know you have to have faith and hope, though. I try to use those feelings through the art of dance; it settles your mind and heart, and gets you going through the day. That's where I am.

WCT: What are you angry about?

VG: I'm angry about the lack of logic in the things that are happening around us, and the willingness of people to accept that. Maybe it's because I'm a Libra and I'm always thinking about balance. Sometimes it seems that we're losing it, but I'm holding on to my faith. The pandemic has put stress on everyone so I tend to not want to tell the entire story, but it's the healthcare system, the people who are in charge, the misinformation. You have to be aware; I'm from the South Side so I walk in the middle of the street at night instead of on the sidewalk so I can see everything. You're constantly checking things and not trusting things. It's a hard way to live. But seeing people in the theater—there's a sense of community that we have to have. That's a great thing that has come out of this crisis.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will perform at the Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Ida B. Wells Dr., on March 2-6. See [AuditoriumTheatre.org](https://auditoriumtheatre.org) and [AlvinAiley.org](https://alviniley.org) . Note: COVID protocols will be followed.