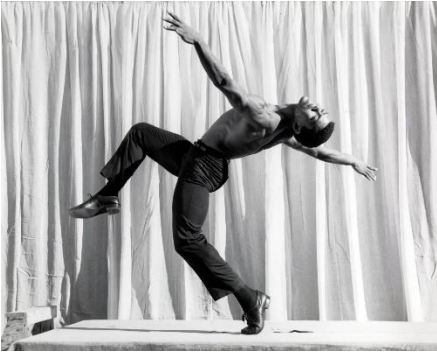


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Alvin Ailey, the Man and the Mind Behind the Unapologetic Sparkle

By: Gia Kourlas

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The name Ailey is synonymous with dance. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is more than a company: It's a brand, an integral piece of the cultural fabric of this country. It's huge.

But somehow the man who created the Ailey empire has become lost inside it, obscured as if by an eclipse. Alvin Ailey was a choreographer who seamlessly melded dance forms, a dancer of extraordinary strength and beauty, and a man — a queer man — with an expansive, restless mind.

He formed his company in 1958 and died of AIDS in 1989. He was only 58. What Ailey accomplished in his short life was remarkable: Building an internationally known dance company, an esteemed school and a body of work that explored the Black experience and dance history in a multitude of ways, while also mining the culture that surrounded him. He was very much engaged in the worlds of visual art, literature, poetry, music and gay life. Everything was his clay. His company was integrated — on purpose — but he inspired Black dancers particularly, showing them that there was a place for them.

Certainly Ailey is a father of Black dance — especially of Black modern dance. Did he want to be? The Ailey organization is perhaps the only institution that has come close to or surpassed the success of modern dance's longtime artistic rival: ballet. But for Ailey, it came at a price. The weight of it all must have been crushing. "Use tea for drug needs," he advised himself in one of his personal notebooks.

Edges of Ailey, opening at the Whitney Museum of American Art on Sept. 25, is a one-of-a-kind exhibition that looks at Ailey in all his dimensions, personal and artistic, as well as the culture that he shaped. One of the most ambitious shows the museum has ever presented — six years in the making and bigger than any Whitney biennial — it tracks the development of an American art form through Ailey's singular vision. Here is a chance to better understand the man behind that vision, to watch his dances with new eyes.

Organized by Adrienne Edwards, the Engell Speyer Family Senior Curator, *Edges of Ailey* consists of an extensive exhibition in the Whitney's fifth-floor galleries, as well as a series of performances through February by the Ailey company and commissioned choreographers.

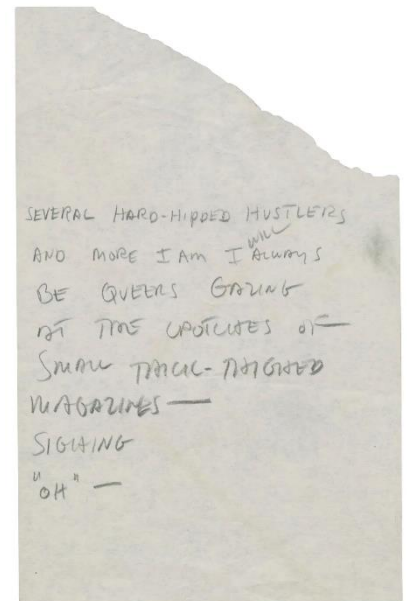
Edwards, who grew up studying dance, said Ailey was "probably the first professional art anything" that she ever saw. "I've been thinking about Ailey for most of my life."

For years she remained a loyal audience member, regularly attending the annual December seasons of Ailey at New York City Center. The Whitney show, she said, could have been about a company. But as she and her curatorial team started to explore Ailey's archives — especially his notebooks — her thinking shifted.

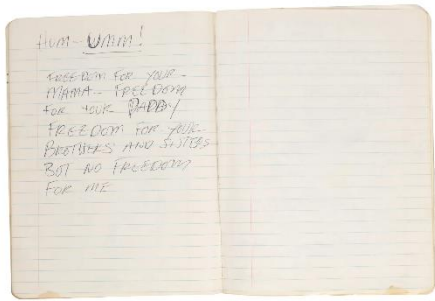
"What I realized is that we were dealing with a life," she said. "It is about the artistry, and there's real work to do there. But there's also this life that was so present in these notebooks."

Edwards instantly had questions: "Who was this man that started this in 1958?" she recalled thinking. "How did he arrive to that moment to do what he did?"

In Ailey's notebooks — entrusted to Allan Gray, a longtime friend at the [Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City](#) — you see a vivid mind at work. They are filled with musings about choreographers and composers, sketches for new dances, thoughts about drugs and sex. One note, "The School Rules," leads with: "Students of the school must not smoke, cigarettes, marijuana, pot, hashish, angel dust, Marlboro, Kent etc."



The rules are harder for him to follow. On another page, he writes, “Do not take any coke.” (The word “more” is crossed out.) Ditto smoking. “Plan your funeral — do will — if you continue smoking c’est pas possible!!”



Ailey, it turns out, was a writer as well as a fervent list maker. There are short stories and poetry. There are packing lists — pot, poppers — as well as an assessment of his character. One positive: “basically honest.” On the negative side: “lack of self-control.”

Somehow you feel Ailey through his handwriting, which ranges from shaky to bold and from cursive to all caps. His ambition and self-doubt, his humor and sadness — it’s all there. One note, under the heading “1980,” reads: “Nervous breakdown. 7 weeks was in hosp—”

There is also unflinching generosity. Ailey created his company to show not only his own dances, but also those of others, including many Black choreographers. In one entry, “Hopes for the Future,” the goal to “create choreographers” comes ahead of “create choreography.”

You see Ailey’s preoccupations. “Water recurs as a theme,” Edwards said, and “he talks about cruising.” There are other references, including erotic writing, to his life as a gay man, which he was not so open about at the time.

Cruising is alluded to in notes about his 1974/1975 work [Night Creature](#), in which he refers to Duke Ellington, whose music the dance is set to, and tellingly to “the people who are themselves at night.”

Under the heading “sex,” are two phone numbers. (“I called those phone numbers,” Edwards said. “No one answered.”)

But while the notebooks track the events of his personal life, they also contain sketches for dances and names of artists and poets. “He had a genuine curiosity,” Edwards said. “The things he was reading. The regular citations of Hart Crane. Like, who would have thought? What is it about this poet that he so identified with?”

She found mentions of many artists in the notebooks, and she was especially struck by an interview in which Ailey said: “I wanted to be a painter. I wanted to be a sculptor. I wanted to write the great American novel. I wanted to be a poet. And for me, dance somehow holds all of these things.”

That gave Edwards the idea to open the show up visually. Along with performance footage, recorded interviews and pieces from his personal archive, *Edges of Ailey* has sections about his influences, including the choreographers Katherine Dunham, Martha Graham, Jack Cole and many more. And it features works by more than 80 artists, including [Barkley L. Hendricks](#) and Rashid Johnson, to help to place Ailey in greater context while also chronicling Black creativity in the United States.



In this way, Ailey is positioned not just in the history of dance, but in the history of American culture. Edwards is telling stories from one artist, or generation, to the next: One of Johnson’s first paintings from his “Anxious Men” series is placed next to Ailey’s nervous breakdown notebook entry.

“The way we think about dance in relationship to modernism, in art history, they are usually sort of separate,” Edwards said. “We’re not doing that here.”

Beyond the artwork and performance footage, the museum will host a robust series of live dancing, beginning with the Ailey company and [Ailey II](#). There will also be new commissioned works, from the veteran choreographers Bill T. Jones and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, as well as from experimental voices including Trajal Harrell, Ralph Lemon (with the artist Kevin Beasley), Sarah Michelson and Will Rawls.

Matthew Rushing, the Ailey company’s interim artistic director, will present *Sacred Songs*, a new dance set to music that had to be cut from Ailey’s 1960 masterpiece, *Revelations*, when it was shortened for touring. Rushing’s cast is made up of

nonprofessional dancers — students from the Ailey Extension — and he has not needed to water down anything for them. “They have shown up in a way that I did not expect,” he said. “It’s inspiring me to push myself further.”

Rawls spent an important summer studying at the Ailey school, though he now makes work that is largely conceptual, driven by language. “I would not be in the career that I am without Alvin Ailey having existed,” he said. “I don’t really see how I could have been inspired and encouraged to be a dancer, and then a choreographer, if I didn’t have the example of that company.”



The same is true for [Harrell](#), who never went the Ailey route but feels “the grandeur and the burden of his accomplishment,” he said.

And the sacrifice. “I think he and Arthur Mitchell” — who formed Dance Theater of Harlem — “are part of that generation that had to prove something as Black dancers, that there was a space for them, that they could do dance as an art form,” he added. “They had to make that space. But because that space was made, I didn’t have to do it.”

At the Whitney, Harrell presents a work inspired by [Katherine Dunham, an important role model for Ailey](#). The dance, *Deathbed*, is based on Harrell’s memory of visiting a dying Dunham. A friend took him. Years later, while working on a series inspired by the Butoh pioneer Tatsumi Hijikata, he learned that Dunham and Hijikata had once shared a studio in Japan.

He started to wonder, How much influence did Dunham have on Hijikata and, in turn, on Butoh? Harrell’s *Deathbed* is about the idea of a suspended moment, the what ifs, the questions that were never asked, just as *Edges of Ailey* deals at times with topics little discussed.

“If I had been a little boy and I had known when I went to see that first Alvin Ailey concert that he was queer,” Harrell said, “I don’t know how that would change my life.”

For Harrell, who comes from a tradition of post-postmodern dance, Ailey fits into modernism, but not the modernism of abstraction. The image of the Black dancer represents, he said, “an expression of feeling.”

Ailey’s work, he added, was “linked to this idea of Black liberation, of struggle, of trying to find a visual and physical representation.”

What made Ailey different — and life changing for so many — was that expressiveness: “That Ailey sparkle,” Edwards said, which relates “to an insistence on entertaining or a certain kind of pleasure or a certain kind of beauty. He was totally unapologetic about it.”

Edwards is not afraid of sparkle either. She’s a different kind of curator, probably because dance was her first art love. “I see almost everything as a performance,” she said, “like the most mundane things. I’m always asking myself the question: Is something performing here? What is performing here?”

Edges of Ailey has a sense of theater, of choreography; she sees Ailey as a person that surrounded himself with a constellation of influences and wants to show that in a visceral way. “I’m not interested in walking up to a wall or looking at a work of art,” Edwards said. “I’m interested in how do all these things flow together or work together or where’s the edge? And how my body in that space is going to relate to the things around it. That kind of shapes or contours everything that I do as a curator.”

How might an exhibition, in other words, make you feel or make you see life differently? It circles back to a line from the notebooks. Ailey writes simply yet emphatically: “We teach people to feel — to own their own feelings.”

This article was also picked up by: [Artdaily](#)