

VANITY FAIR

The Ailey Legacy Takes Center Stage At The Whitney Museum With *Edges of Ailey*

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Alvin Ailey has never left the hearts of dancers, and it is that legacy which guides *Edges of Ailey*, the large-scale, multidisciplinary exhibition opening September 25 at the Whitney Museum. Under the direction of Senior Curator and Associate Director Adrienne Edwards, the life and works of the choreographer, dancer and artist are displayed alongside an archive of personal ephemera, music, and performance.

“I had a real awareness of what it would mean to take on Ailey's legacy because he's been so foundational to me, and certainly almost every dancer I know and talk to has had to contend with that legacy in one way or another,” Edwards said. In the early days of Edwards' tenure at the museum, Director Scott Rothkopf posed the question of what hasn't been done in the museum space and to Edwards the answer was almost too obvious. “If you're Black and dancing, you had to think about Ailey. There was just no way around it.” Thus, *Edges of Ailey*.

The exhibition is presented in sections, the first overtaking the fifth floor galleries while another part takes place in the museum theater. The repertory companies, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Ailey II, Ailey Extension, and The Ailey School will all be in residence in the museum for a week each month of the show's duration, a total of five times. In the intervening weeks, a commissioned group of choreographers and their collaborators including Trajal Harrell and Bill T. Jones will each present a work or more on the occasion. An “extravaganza” as Edwards put it. “So it is dance literally all the time.”

Research entailed combing through nearly 10 archives, from the Library of Congress to personal material left in the care of Allan Gray, a long-term supporter who operated as an anchor for the Ailey Dance Theater in Kansas City. Notebooks, drawings, correspondence, research files all under Gray's stewardship.

“He wanted to be a painter; he wanted to be a sculptor; he wanted to write the Great American Novel,” Edwards explained. Ailey's short stories and poems will be shown publicly for the first time. “He wanted to be a poet. And that for him, dance allowed him to encompass all of those things.”

This exhaustive ambition informed the scope of the exhibition. Ailey did not limit himself, and neither could Edwards in taking on the full extent of his person. “I just am known for working with artists who are a bit motley in their sensibility,” Edwards joked.

“In turning my direction toward who is the man himself, it actually opened up the way that we could even think about the choreography. And we haven't limited ourselves in only looking at the dances he made for the company, but we've looked at the ones he did elsewhere.”

“It started unfolding in all these different directions, even towards the end, him choreographing the opening night of Studio 54, which nobody really knows ...*Edges of Ailey* is about showing this relationship between the personal and the professional, how truly inextricable they are.”

To get at all Ailey was/is—his queerness, Blackness, his masculinity, artistry—and himself curious about: in his works, references and proclivities, would be to spend another lifetime on the task; so here we remain instead. Just the edge of it all. “There was a story to be told and it was way more complicated, way more fascinating than anybody could have imagined.”

Here, a body of work spun together to the tune of Ailey's visionary presence in culture then and now, onstage and off.

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