

FRIEZE

Carry Forward

By: Malik Gaines, Alastair Macaulay, Constance Stamatiou and Eva Yaa Asantewaa

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Festschrift: As Alvin Ailey's retrospective opens at the Whitney Museum, *Malik Gaines, Alastair Macaulay, Constance Stamatiou* and members of the choreographer's company reflect on how his astonishing vision changed American dance

Carry Forward



The virtuosity of Alvin Ailey proposed
an alternative to the forward march of 20th-century
art history by Malik Gaines

The Line Becomes a Spiral

Alvin Ailey has been a huge inspiration to me, though the influence may not be immediately obvious on the surface of my practice. As an artist working in performance for the past 24 years, I've enjoyed the opportunity to mix things up, playing with the supposed distinctions among presence, history, 'the body', theatre, media, spectacle, the everyday and technical artforms. While I lack virtuoso technique in my own performance, the closest I've come to that is in practicing an advanced form of interdisciplinarity and, increasingly, working with trained musicians. The space between an accessible, vernacular event and a masterful performance is historically fraught and politically charged, especially in relation to Black artists and the expectations they face. It is in this context that José Esteban Muñoz, in his book *Cruising Utopia* (2009), described the work of my performance collective, My Barbarian, as an example of 'queer virtuosity', which he posed as an ironic inversion of the then-prominent theoretical idea of 'queer failure'. Our work, he argued, departed from the demands of performing art but, inspired by the performers who influenced us, we were trying to succeed.

There is much to learn about virtuosity from Ailey's legacy. It's also instructive to see the ways his powerful, expressive work distorts an avant-gardist, modernist genealogy. The 20th century flowed in many directions at once, while the fine art traditions some of us were taught proposed Oedipal relations of fathers and sons carrying a family line of art in one direction: always forward. As the avant-garde's patrimony was constantly to upend conventional expectations through ever-inventive formal innovations, this model of artistic invention conformed to a Eurocentric historical idea of modernity that cloaked its churning violent ruptures as progress. Not surprisingly, as the inheritors of this violence, Black people have often followed other paths through art.

Ailey understood modern dance. Mentored by dancer-choreographer Lester Horton in Los Angeles, he was

a student of all the techniques by the time he got to New York, in the late 1950s. Ailey benefitted from an excess of influences: ballet, the Afro-Caribbean impulses of Katherine Dunham, Broadway and his own family experiences all contributed to his syncretic approach. This was evident in the works of his company. During the mid-century heyday of New York abstraction, Ailey developed a vocabulary to represent beauty, pain, pleasure, abjection, striving and excellence from a historically Black American perspective. These works are sedimented with the unfathomable skill and technique of his company and energized by the exuberant reproduction of Black life they offered.

When, in 1971, Judith Jamison premiered Ailey's *Cry* – a *tour de force* of nearly superhuman power that narrated a movement through oppression and freedom – the critics cheered with everyone else. But they also noted that this virtuoso star-power was out of step. In the aftermath of works like Yvonne Rainer's 'No Manifesto' (1964), which said no to moving and being moved, New York dance was decidedly minimal. Ailey's maximalism – one that remains popular with audiences to this day – was a necessity, since Black companies, choreographers, authors and artists had not been a substantial part of the avant-garde's family drama. Black people had danced, for sure, but they had made few concert dances. As such, they bore no requirement to carry forward the lineage's investments. *Cry* made large historical claims and formally interfered with dance's progress but, designed by Ailey as a birthday gift to his mother, hewed closely to a personal experience not recognizable from downtown dance stages. The supposed straight line of history becomes a spiral when we look at it from another perspective.

Malik Gaines is an artist and member of the collective My Barbarian.

Previous page
Alvin Ailey surrounded
by the *Compass*, 1978.
Courtesy: © Alvin Ailey
Dance Foundation, Inc.
and the Smithsonian
Institution; photo-
graph: Jack Mitchell

Opposite page
Alvin Ailey and Carmen
De Lavallade in *Rest
of the Blues*, 1981.
Courtesy: © Alvin Ailey
Dance Foundation, Inc.
and the Smithsonian
Institution; photo-
graph: Jack Mitchell



Current and former members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater reflect on the legacy of the great choreographer by *Eva Yaa Asantewaa*

Dancer from the Dance



Alvin Ailey gave the world of dance many decades of extraordinary memories, and those of us fortunate enough to have experienced his company's performances surely have a favourite. Your first *Revelations* (1960). Maybe your 30th. The first time you watched Judith Jamison dance *Cry*. Or the time you cried as Jamison took her last spin in this classic. Filing into theatre seats with mum and dad, grandma, aunts, the kids – all soon united in wonder at a big stage filled with performers of exquisite technique, charisma and soul. Ailey's legacy, though, is more than nostalgia. Here, some members of the Ailey community share what made him an innovative visionary, not only for his company but for the field of dance and society at large.

Sylvia Waters
Former company member;
artistic director emerita, Ailey II

Ailey had a lot in mind for the future: building a repertory company and finding a home for it, having dancers with all techniques reconciled in one body – the total dancer. His early commissions came from ballet troupes such as American Ballet Theatre, Joffrey Ballet and the Royal Danish Ballet; he loved classical line. He wanted you to point your feet as well as to flex them. He left a master plan for a school teaching multiple disciplines – Martha Graham, Lester Horton, samba, tap, West African. Movement is our first language, and he used that exceedingly well. No language barrier. He said dance comes from the people and should be given back to the people.

He left a master plan for a school teaching multiple disciplines.

Sylvia Waters



Jacquelin Harris
Company member since 2014;
choreographer

Ailey created the company to honour his voice and the voices of the marginalized and oppressed. When you see that we all have similar ideals, intentions and hopes, you must acknowledge everyone's purpose in the world. We all deserve human rights, the pursuit of happiness and the opportunity to be hopeful and to triumph. Honesty and humanity are things I've learned in this company. Authenticity, too. As a creator myself, that is immensely valuable. I grew up in a world in which dance was showy. I tried to show the audience how graceful I am. But in this company, I learned that if you bring your authentic self to the audience, they will see that grace and receive exactly what they need to receive.



We think dance is the
putting on of things – really,
it's the revealing.

Jamar Roberts

Jamar Roberts

Former company member;
resident choreographer, 2019–22

Ailey knew exactly what he wanted to communicate and did so clearly. I've always been drawn to that level of vision – creating whole narratives by delving into the passions and hearts of people. Sometimes we think dance is the putting on of things – the more I turn, the higher I jump – when, really, it's the revealing. I look at dancers in their 40s or 50s, and it's always about the simplest things. All the beauty's there. I remember watching Renee Robinson dance certain roles towards the end of her career and being completely floored. One movement of her head was enough to bring me to tears. Sometimes I feel like an outlier because I'm always trying to hold onto that.

This spread
"Edges of Ailey", 2024–25,
Whitney Museum of
American Art, New York.
Courtesy: Whitney
Museum of American
Art; photographs:
Natasha Moustache

Danni Gee

Former company member;
director of programming, The Joyce Theater

Dancers from Ailey II have gone on to various careers – whether into the main company, as choreographers in their own right or as directors. Ailey wasn't selfish. He inspired younger dancers to put their own vision on stage. He encouraged Dwight Rhoden very early on, which led to Dwight's Complexions Contemporary Ballet. Alvin would wander the streets talking to people, so he could bring to the stage an understanding of the universal themes we all have to deal with every day – like facing death, questioning our faith. We, as a people have always celebrated, no matter what our conditions. In my role as curator and presenter, I have to make sure we express those themes and messages. A lot of the dance artists I admire and champion are storytellers – like Kyle Abraham – touched by Alvin's genius, his curiosity and his love of Black people. He was always searching for his next new thought to keep evolving. He was unlimited!



Alvin Ailey's most important dance
dwelled in history to celebrate freedom
by Alastair Macaulay

Revelator

THE OPENING OF ALVIN AILEY's *Revelations* (1960) is always cast to show a whole spectrum of skin tones. In its first movement, 'I Been 'Buked', the tension of outstretched arms and splayed hands demonstrates, with intensity, what analysts refer to as 'bound' movement. The whole number lyrically suggests imprisonment, even when it gathers speed in the central section. As the dancers move their torsos sideways and around - above all, when they raise their arms and sway - it's as if they are describing a small vision of blue sky high above their prison. As *Revelations* continues, we watch gestures of outstretched arms, hands and legs, but with new phrasings and rhythms that suggest that these dancers, with no loss of grandiloquence, are casting off any chains that once bound them. Its largeness of spirit has always made *Revelations* a classic; its stylistic variety has established it as a masterpiece of expression. In 1842, Verdi, in his opera *Nabucco*, composed a famous 'Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves' that became the anthem of the Italian Risorgimento, the movement that led to the rejection of foreign occupation and the unification of Italy. Ailey's *Revelations* is a political dance in a related but different way: it embodies the longings and ardour of a people moving out of slavery into joyous pride in community.

Tapping the unforgotten grief of slavery, the profound fervour of liberation and the intense release of communal celebration, the choreography of Ailey's *Revelations* relies on fixed gestures and tableaux, while the varied skin hues form a visual statement about how the US (and the world) contains multitudes. Even though the imagery here is of suffering and of pleas for freedom, it also reminds us that we are not alone in that suffering, that those feelings onstage are ours, too. We're all involved here. Its spirit, for Black and other audiences alike, can be overwhelming. It reminds me most of Beethoven's *Fidelio* (1805), the composer's opera about unfair imprisonment. And *Revelations*, in its use of words and music and movement, is as much opera as dance, especially when the singing is live. It has no single narrative, yet at every point it offers great lyric drama.

From its first moments to its last, *Revelations* draws us into the devout expansiveness of the music - into layers of feeling that are both specifically African American

and universal - through an expressive counterpoint of gospel and blues. As *Revelations* progresses from there, it seems to take us through successive rooms of different heights and scales, in a systematic process. We watch human beings change - in a process of catharsis that, in turn, changes us. The most intimate stages occur in 'Fix Me, Jesus' and 'I Wanna Be Ready'. 'Fix Me, Jesus', a male-female duet, is a tenderly heroic dialogue between pastor and convert, healer and healed; the woman's beautiful alternations between dependence on the man and independence from him are movingly glorious. In the male solo 'I Wanna Be Ready', the dialogue comes from within the lone human: we're shown impulse and counter-impulse as part of continuous discipline. Both 'Fix Me, Jesus' and 'I Wanna Be Ready' are dances of heightened rigour: rigour both physical and spiritual.

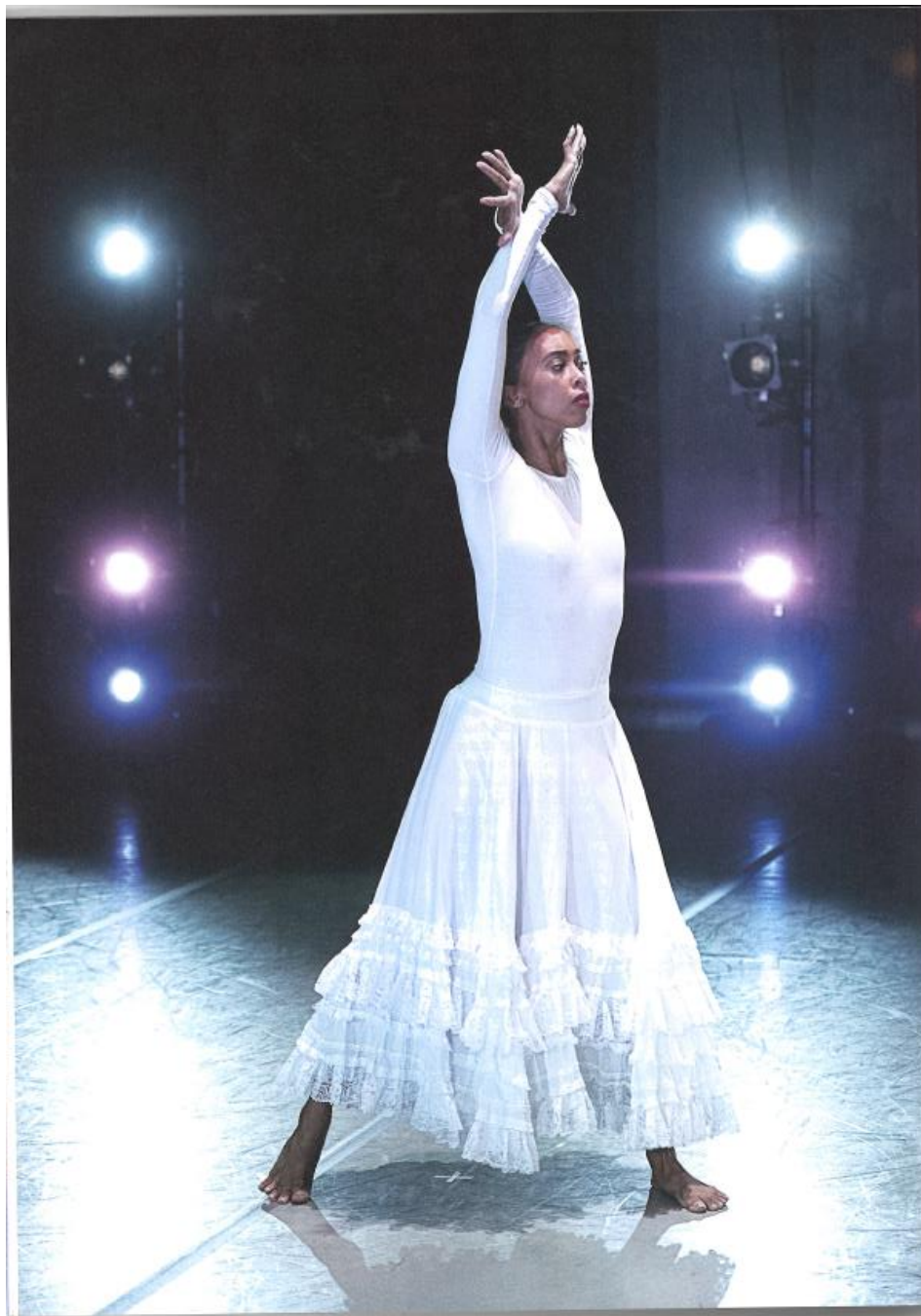
Each section is composed in a different dance idiom. We watch for their interconnected meanings. Seen literally, the movement in the finale, 'Rocka my Soul in the Bosom of Abraham', depicts (not without comedy) what it's like for a church congregation on a hot day in the American South. By this stage in *Revelations*, however, we can no longer be literal. We've now passed through tribulation and release, sin and redemption, prayer and transfiguration, in a process that has established the uncrushable power of the human spirit, so that we, too, now share its pulsating, multidirectional joy.

Ailey was still in his 20s when he choreographed *Revelations*. He was to make other classics, *Cry* (1971) and *Night Creature* (1974) among them. When he died in 1989 at the age of 58, his choreography, his company and his dance centre had long been important across the world. In the 35 years since his death, that importance has only grown. It's *Revelations*, however, that stays at the core of the Ailey experience, with the many kinds of transcendence it presents. It takes dancers and audiences on a large and complex journey of the spirit.

Alastair Macaulay is a critic and historian of the performing arts. He was chief theatre critic of the *Financial Times*, London, from 1994-2007, and chief dance critic of *The New York Times* from 2007-18.



Alvin Ailey, Lu Ransom and Li Abbott in *Revelations* 1964. Courtesy: AILEY; photos: Zoë Dominic



Constance Stamatiou in *Cry*, 2021. Courtesy: AILEY; photograph: Christopher Duggan

More than a half century after it premiered, *Cry* remains a poignant expression of loss and grief
by Constance Stamatiou

Mourning into Dancing

GROWING UP IN CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA, in the 1980s, I was often the only minority woman in my dance or gymnastics classes. The significance of representation never dawned on me until I moved to New York after high school, and I saw the Alvin Ailey company for the first time. It just blew my mind that most of the dancers looked like me. That's when I knew what I wanted to do: I wanted to be like them.

Along with so many other dancers and dance lovers, I've always felt a special connection with Ailey's choreography. His dances are experiences that he's lived and turned into movement: these are his blood memories. And so, growing up in the South, growing up in a Baptist church, I could connect with *Revelations* (1960), which is a ballet that swings from the lowest lows and the profoundest sorrows to the most jubilant highs. I've watched closely all the women who performed *Cry* (1971), the dance Ailey choreographed for Judith Jamison. Created as a birthday gift for his mother, this solo was dedicated to 'all Black women everywhere, especially our mothers.'

I first learned *Cry* in 2008, when it was performed as a three-person ballet. Now, since recently returning from maternity leave, I'm performing it as a solo again. Initially, I was anxious because you want to do the piece justice, and so many great women have already danced it. But now, as a mother I can tap into what motherhood brings – the lows, the anxiety, all those things – and I can relate to those mothers that have really been through it, who have lost their kids, which is one of the themes of the ballet. At the beginning of the dance, when I hold a piece of cloth, it represents the dead body of a child. With all

the things going on in the world, all the images we're seeing on the news, *Cry* feels perfect for this moment, for all those mothers who can't hug their children.

Three years ago, we celebrated the ballet's 50th anniversary. When I first danced the role, I can remember feeling unworthy of it. And, over the years, there have been many times when I've thought I wasn't there with it yet, but I've kept pushing, giving it my all. Then, this year, I was nominated for a UK National Dance Award for my performance of *Cry*. My mind was blown! I know I still have further to go with that ballet. I haven't tapped into its fullest potential yet, because I am still learning to be comfortable in my vulnerability. There's something missing: I still need to fully let myself go. When I was in my 20s, I was used to being told what to do, what to think, how to portray; in a sense, I felt I was a fraud. I pretended to be someone that I wasn't. So, when I became a mother of two kids who I would like to see turn into decent human beings, it helped me tap into the dance and what it means to be a mother.

Cry is not a period piece; it resonates with each generation. But now, as a mother in my thirties dancing this ballet, I'm a lot more mature, and I can fill it with my own story. I'm drawing on my own reality rather than an impersonation of someone else's – someone like my mother, who raised four kids, two of whom were incarcerated. When I first performed *Cry*, I tried to tap into those experiences. Now, I have my own voice. ■

Constance Stamatiou is a member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. She is a lead dancer and was the face of the company's 2023–24 season.