

DanceTeacher

2025 Dance Teacher Award Honoree Sylvia Waters Has Inspired Early-Career Dancers to Tap Into their Humanity

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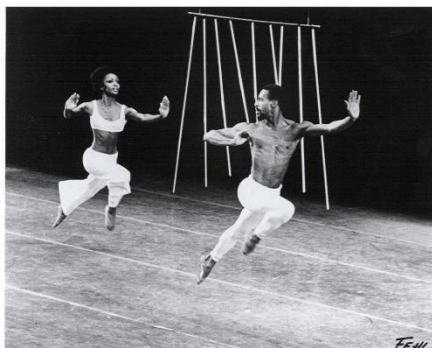
When one thinks of the legendary dancer Sylvia Waters, excellence, poise, and artistry are among the first attributes that come to mind. But in the classroom, her heart, brilliance, and spirit are what have elevated and inspired thousands of dancers. Selected by Alvin Ailey himself to join Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and later to lead the newly formed Ailey II in 1974, Waters has helped to mentor and elevate countless dancers through the transition from student to professional, all the while shaping a junior company into a globally respected institution.

Born and raised in New York City, Waters began tap and creative-dance classes in junior high school. Then, in high school, a dance teacher truly set her on her path by encouraging further training at a formal dance studio. “I saved my allowance, registered for classes, and got to work,” says Waters. She trained at the New Dance Group, a school and performance troupe, where she studied with such luminaries as Donald McKayle and Carmen de Lavallade.

That early discipline would lead her to The Juilliard School, where she was awestruck by fellow classmates like Dudley Williams and Mabel Robinson, and inspired by the diverse techniques she encountered. While balancing rigorous college training, she continued to perform with young concert dancers of the New Dance Group as well as with choreographer Hava Kohav.

Waters first encountered Alvin Ailey by chance while walking down New York’s 57th Street when she was 14 years old. “He smiled at me,” she remembers. “Funny enough, the next day he walked into the New Dance Group as my substitute teacher and said hello like he already knew me.”

Though it would be a few more years before she officially joined Ailey’s company, that moment marked the beginning of a remarkable journey. After college, Waters left for a seven-week European tour of the culturally iconic Langston Hughes play *Black Nativity*. By coincidence, she was performing in London at the same time as Ailey’s company, where she was able to keep that connection alive. Following the tour, she lived in Paris for three and a half years, and continued to travel and dance throughout Europe in countries such as Germany, Spain, Portugal, Denmark, and Finland.



THE ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATRE

In 1968, she joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, where she performed alongside virtuosos such as Judith Jamison, Clive Thompson, and Linda Kent. “To be with those dancers, at that time, was truly an honor,” Waters says. “To see them up close—the consistency and the work was incredible. We were like a family.”

Donna Wood, a former AAADT company member and friend, danced with Waters during this time. “She was always so warm and had such a rich understanding of history and dance,” says Wood. “You could always sense her rich spirit.”

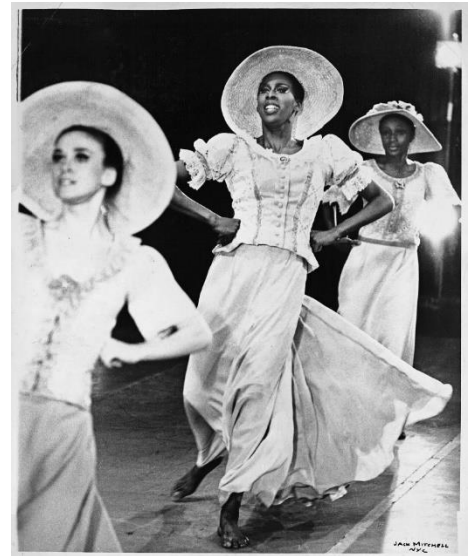
While balancing the demands of being both a professional dancer and a mother, Waters began seeking a new way to engage with the art form. She'd danced with the company for seven years and seen it double in size (to about 30 dancers) by 1975. She shared her thoughts with Ailey, who asked her to help lead the newly formed junior company, Ailey II. He saw it as an opportunity to develop the most promising dancers in the school for a professional career. Waters, who had already been studying acting as well as teaching company classes on the road, saw the leadership role as a way to hone her other skills.

"Honestly, I was terrified," Waters admits. "But I took it as a challenge—and a way to stay close to the company and the dancers."

Under Waters' direction, Ailey II flourished, growing to international heights. Its performances ranged from outreach programs in senior centers and prisons to tours to prestigious global venues. She taught the dancers' classes, such as Horton technique and ballet, and coached them in repertory pieces. Waters also saw Ailey II as a space to offer opportunities to emerging choreographers.

To help shape these young dancers into professionals, Waters asked them to tap into their personal experiences. "I tried to insist on integrity and hard work," she says. "I wanted to provide them with tools and information I thought they needed, as human beings, to look inward to their humanity."

Daniel Harder, a former dancer with both Ailey II and AAADT, and current ensemble member in *The Lion King* on Broadway, remembers her studio presence vividly. "She always expressed how every movement had a deeper meaning," he shares. "Her eye was extremely sharp, and she could tailor each movement to the individual artist in the room. It made us feel seen, valued, and respected."



After 37 years, Waters retired as Ailey II's artistic director in 2012, although she has continued to serve as a mentor and historic voice for the organization by offering master classes and workshops. And her passion shows no sign of fading; she still attends performances, offers gems of wisdom to both the second and main Ailey companies, and uses her platform to elevate others. "Everything I've done has been a gift and a way to extend my artistic life," she says.

What distinguishes Waters as a dance education pioneer is her unique ability to blend high expectations for technical precision with deep compassion for each dancer's growth. "Outside of skill level and technique, I wanted them to not be afraid to expose themselves personally," she says. "I regarded each dancer as an individual. They were all gifted and very special."

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