



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Company Members On Expanding Its Legacy With Afro-Latino And Afro-Caribbean Dance

By: Martie Bowser
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The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's holiday season is underway at New York City Center through Jan. 4.

This season marks more than just another year of the artistic phenomenon that uses dance as a catalyst for spiritual and cultural expression. It also marks the dawn of a new chapter under the guidance of Artistic Director Alicia Graf Mack, whose inaugural season embraces both the company's foundational Black roots and its evolving commitment to diversity, now including the Afro-Latino diaspora.

Founded in 1958 by innovative dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was created as a safe space for Black dancers who were denied access and opportunities at other institutions. Over time, performances such as *Revelations*, a celebration of African American heritage, *Cry*, choreographed by Ailey to honor Black women everywhere, and *Masekela Langage*, a piece that drew parallels between apartheid and racial injustice, made the dance company a global force.

Alvin Ailey became known for using artistic freedom to celebrate African American identity while not shying away from the controversial topics of identity and belonging.

Today, the company has expanded its intersectional vision to include Afro-Caribbean and Latin dance. Afro-Brazilian dancer Dandara Veiga found her way from The Ailey School to the ensemble after seeing performers who looked like her. Bronx-born Sebastian Garcia, of Afro-Dominican descent, found his introduction to dance through AileyCamp. This educational summer program gave him an early sense of belonging and a creative voice. Instructor Katherine Jiménez, an Afro-Latina Mambo teacher with the Ailey Extension, is fostering the rhythm of cultural fusion in motion, making Afro-Caribbean and Latin forms approachable for newcomers and veterans alike. For her, the Mambo is more than music and combination steps; it's a conversation between African heritage and history.



Blavity spoke with the creatives about the pride they have in bringing their heritage to life on stage.

Blavity: What do you think inspired the Alvin Ailey company's vision to embrace and celebrate Latino communities through performance and education?

Dandara Veiga: Mr. Ailey's legacy is all about celebrating diversity —sharing his own culture while learning from others, including Latinx communities. His quote, "Dance came from the people and should always be delivered back to the people," perfectly reflects this. During the "Edges of Ailey" exhibition at the Whitney, seeing his travels to Brazil and his engagement with Afro-Brazilian culture made me feel honored to be part of his continuing legacy.

Katherine Jiménez: Ailey has always embraced a global vision, one that celebrates the African diaspora in all its forms, including the deep connections to Latin and Caribbean cultures. From its beginnings, Ailey's mission has been rooted in representing the fullness of the human experience, and that naturally includes Afro-Latin voices, rhythms and stories. The Ailey community has always been inclusive of Afro-Latin culture, recognizing that our histories and dances are interconnected.

In what ways do you feel Ailey's mission of "bringing dance back to the people" has resonated with Afro-Latino audiences, dancers and choreographers?



DV: His work speaks universally through movement, rhythm, storytelling and expression. These elements connect across cultures and resonate deeply with Afro-Latino communities, reflecting our heritage, rhythm and energy. There are elements that deeply resonate with me personally and bring back memories of my upbringing. For example, certain movements in some ballets remind me of dances that honor the orixás in Yoruba culture — traditions that are very much alive in Brazil and were brought by enslaved Africans generations ago. Even in *Revelations*, the colors, the costumes, and some of the movements in sections like "Procession" and "Wade in the Water" evoke, in my eyes, a strong connection to Afro-Latin culture. Similarly, in *Grace* by Ronald K. Brown, the physicality and spirit of the choreography often remind

me of Afro-Cuban dance and gestures that reflect the Yoruba orixás. I want to be clear that this is how I connect personally — through my background and perspective as an Afro-Brazilian woman, I see and feel those cultural echoes within the movement.

KJ: That mission resonates deeply because it honors where we come from, our traditions, our music, our joy. Afro-Latino communities understand dance as part of everyday life, not just performance. Ailey's approach mirrors that belief by opening doors for people from all walks of life to find themselves in the movement. Whether you're in the audience or on the dance floor, you feel seen.

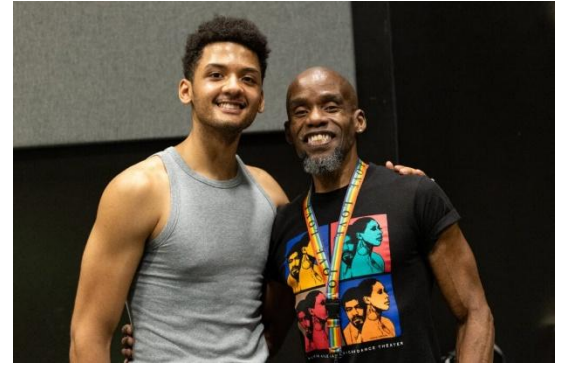
Sebastian Garcia: Alvin Ailey's work often taps into what it means to be human through dance. When audiences see the company, they can easily see themselves reflected on stage through its dancers, the costumes or the story. The company acknowledges Afro-Latinx audiences through the choreographers it collaborates with. This season, the company will perform a ballet by Maija García titled *Jazz Island*. The ballet brings to life a Caribbean folk story inspired by Geoffrey Holder's written work, "Black Gods, Green Islands," with music composed by Etienne Charles. Throughout the entire commission, Maija was very adamant about involving the entire company in conversations about Caribbean folk stories, rituals, lifestyles, and how we, as a whole, could come together to tell this story respectfully. This level of care lets a community like the Afro-Latinx community know they are seen and valued as important contributors to the arts.

What impact has representation by dancers from Latin America and the Caribbean had on the company's reach and relationship with those regions?

DV: Representation has been vital. Touring nationally and internationally with community workshops allows Ailey to connect directly with audiences. Programs like The Ailey School auditions abroad give dancers like me the chance to pursue training and careers that were once dreams. I've noticed a tremendous impact since touring as a member of the company. Many Latinx artists and students have reached out to Leonardo Brito and me, celebrating our presence in the first company and expressing new excitement about Ailey. It's been so heartwarming to witness. From the research Leonardo and I have done, since the company's founding, the only Brazilian artist who worked directly with Mr. Ailey during his lifetime was Ismael Ivo — an influential figure in Brazil's dance industry. To our knowledge, Leo and I are the first Brazilians to join the main company since then, and we can't express how much of an honor that is. We truly look forward to performing with the company in Brazil someday, to celebrate that moment closely with our loved ones in the audience. It fills me with pride and emotion to see more Latin students at The Ailey School today. When I first joined the school in 2016, I didn't speak English, so I understand how challenging it can be to adapt and belong. That's why it's so important to build connections, lift each other up and show that this dream is possible.

KJ: Representation builds bridges. Seeing dancers from the Caribbean and Latin America reflected on stage invites audiences from those same communities to feel a sense of belonging. It also strengthens Ailey's global relationships, reminding everyone that dance is a shared language that connects us across borders.

SG: Alvin Ailey is a very diverse dance company, from the dancers to the artistic staff. This level of diversity often opened up a way for Ailey to be involved in multiple Latin American/Caribbean spaces. One impact Alvin Ailey has had is its ability to offer open classes to the public. Ailey offers multiple Latinx and Caribbean traditional dance styles taught by professionals through its Ailey Extension program. Regarding how the representation has impacted me on a personal level, when I was first hearing about Alvin Ailey as a student, two dancers I admired were Linda Celeste Sims and Belen Pereyra. Both dancers, while technically and artistically proficient, had cultural lineage from the Dominican Republic. I am a first-generation American Dominican, so to see that other Dominicans were being shown in such an artistic light at such a high caliber was very motivational. Now that I am in the company, it is nice to know that my journey started partly because I saw what I could become through representation.



How does it feel to be part of a company that so intentionally merged cultures through dance?

DV: I feel honored and grateful. As an Afro-Latina from a small town in Brazil, I began ballet at 13 and searched for dancers who looked like me. Through Ailey, I found a place where dance became my language, my expression, and my way to belong. I had the opportunity to expand my training in other countries before joining Ailey, but there is something very special about being part of this organization—it allows me to continue that journey with a true sense of belonging.

KJ: It feels powerful and deeply personal. The Ailey legacy gave me the foundation to find my own voice as an artist and educator. But I also recognized that Afro-Caribbean dances, like Mambo, Pachanga, Cha Cha, and Boogaloo, were not part of the formal techniques I trained in at The Ailey School. About ten years ago, I began implementing these techniques in my classes through the Ailey Extension. It's been an honor to introduce and develop these forms within an institution that values inclusion and authenticity. That integration is historic for me because it bridges the cultural experiences that shaped who I am with the legacy of Ailey's mission.

SG: I feel very blessed to be part of a company that is so heavily diversified. In the studio, I am constantly learning something new from my fellow colleagues. This keeps me curious and humbled. We often live in a world where arrogance comes as a result of not interacting with people who are different from us. Working for a highly diverse company gives me the opportunity to learn new skills from everyone I meet.

Dandara, you first entered the Ailey community through The Ailey School. What do you think makes this training environment particularly inclusive and welcoming to Afro-Latino students?

DV: It's the legacy of Mr. Ailey and the community that carries it. His reminder that "dance came from the people" creates a space where Latinx dancers feel seen, valued and encouraged. For me, the most powerful part of training at The Ailey School was being in a room surrounded by incredibly talented teachers and colleagues who looked like me. That gave me a kind of assurance that what I was pursuing—though difficult and demanding—was not impossible. I was very shy when I arrived and didn't speak English at the time, so I learned by observing. Not everyone realized that my quietness came from a language barrier, but despite that, I always felt included. My teachers took the time to connect beyond words—through energy, gestures and patience. They corrected me, encouraged me and helped me find my voice through movement. There was a real sense of care in the studio. That environment allowed me to learn how to understand and express myself beyond language, and that's what made me feel truly seen and valued.

The Afro-Brazilian community has several dance styles with African roots, such as Samba and Capoeira. Are those, or any other styles, integrated into your routines at Ailey to demonstrate the bridging of cultures physically?

DV: Yes, I absolutely see these dance styles in several pieces we perform. Many of the company's works celebrate movement traditions from across the African diaspora and the Americas, and Maija Garcia's *Jazz Island* is a wonderful example of that. In *Jazz Island*, there's even a "Goddess" character that, to me, evokes the spirit of the Yoruba orixás and Afro-Cuban movement. The music, rhythm and emotional energy of the piece also carry a deep Afro-Latin connection in my eyes. It feels like a celebration of that shared heritage and the joy that comes from it. The organization also offers classes and workshops for the public in styles including Afro-Cuban, salsa, Zumba, and other Latin American influences through Ailey Extension. These styles physically reflect the cultural bridging that Ailey embodies.

Katherine, like AileyCamp, the Ailey Extension has made dance education accessible beyond professional training, which can be daunting for beginners. How do you ensure you're introducing people to the cultural roots and impact of the dances while keeping it fun and easy to learn?

KJ: I approach every class with intention and joy. I believe that when people understand where a dance comes from, its rhythm, its people, its purpose, they move differently. So while I break down complex patterns in simple ways, I'm always giving cultural context. I make sure my students feel the connection to the roots while having fun in the process. That balance of education and joy is what makes dance transformative.

Over the years, how has the Ailey Extension reinforced the idea that dance is not just performance but community expression?

KJ: The Ailey Extension is a community in motion. It's where people of all ages, backgrounds and levels come together to share space, energy and joy. You see friendships form, confidence grow and culture celebrated. Dance becomes more than choreography; it becomes a language of connection and belonging.

You also entered the Ailey community through The Ailey School. What do you think makes this training environment particularly inclusive and welcoming to Afro-Latino students?

KJ: As an "Ailey baby," the Ailey School has truly been my home since the beginning of my dance journey. It's where I've always felt welcome, powerful and deeply connected to my ancestors. The Ailey School embraces diversity at its core; it's an environment that encourages you to bring your whole self into the room: your heritage, your story, your individuality. That kind of inclusivity allows Afro-Latino students like myself to see ourselves reflected in the artistry and in the broader cultural dialogue that Ailey represents. It's a place where your background isn't just accepted, it's celebrated.

Sebastian, the AileyCamp allowed you to immerse yourself in dance at an age when it may have been inaccessible to some. How do you feel the camp is breaking barriers for dance as an outlet for Black and Latino youth?

SG: AileyCamp was such a vital place for me and my upbringing as a dancer. The camp, which is part of Ailey Arts In Education & Community Programs, offers at-risk children in major cities a way to reach their full potential through dance. In this day and age, a lot of Afro-Latinx youth aren't given the healthiest spaces to express themselves, especially if they are first-generation Americans. AileyCamp offers kids role models whom they can relate to and workshops where kids learn valuable tools to be a kinder, more confident person. The camp also does a good job of giving kids the space to be kids while also teaching them about personal development through the arts. As a camper, I learned how to feel confident in my own skin and communicate my emotions effectively.

What lessons from AileyCamp's community-centered approach do you carry with you as a performer in the company today?

SG: As an AileyCamper, one lesson I learned was to never give up on what I'm interested in doing. Throughout the program, the entire camp would start its mornings by reciting a list of affirmations. At the time, I did not know why or the impact this would have on me as a person until the program was over. What these affirmations did was instill in all of us a form of confidence to take on the world and a level of trust in our own abilities. One affirmation I always remembered was our last one, which read, "I will not use the word can't to find my possibilities." This is a very powerful affirmation because it debunks the idea of not being able to do something from one's mind. This idea is such a powerful thing, especially for Afro-Latinx youth. So often, Afro-Latinx youth are reminded of what they can't do in this world. This affirmation reminds them of their worth and propels them to do more.

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