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The Spirit of Ailey and the Horton Technique

By: Greta Pieropan

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COVER STORY

ALESSIO REZZA

SPECIAL

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CULTURE

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FOCUS ON

DANCE AND THE OLYMPICS

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ALESSIO REZZA

Elegant and technically impeccable, Alessio Rezza possesses that indefinable spark that distinguishes a truly unique artist. Now a Principal Dancer at the Rome Opera Theatre, Rezza recently delivered a brilliant performance in the title role of *Marco Spada* — a part originally played by Rudolf Nureyev at the ballet's 1981 premiere. We sat down with him.

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"Making dances is an act of progress; it is an act of growth, an act of music, an act of teaching, an act of celebration, an act of joy"
Alvin Ailey

THE SPIRIT OF AILEY AND THE HORTON TECHNIQUE

BY GRETA PIEROPAN

Alvin Ailey (© Jack Mitchell)

"Dance is for everybody. I believe that dance came from the people and that it should always be delivered back to the people". A vision of dance according to the dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey, who founded his eponymous company in the US in 1958. Today, the company still carries a universal message rooted in the experience of the African American community, which sees dance as a profound, moving expression of humanity.

Born in Rogers, Texas in 1931, when the United States was still under racial segregation, Ailey soon realised that the body could become a vehicle for freedom and affirmation of self-identity. After moving to Los Angeles with his mother in the 1940s, Ailey was persuaded by a friend, Carmen de Lavallade, to study dance with Lester Horton. Horton had by then already created the technique

named after him, and in 1946 he founded one of the first permanent spaces dedicated to modern dance in the United States (the Lester Horton Dance Theater), where he held dance courses and rehearsed with his company. Horton was among the first choreographers to insist on racial integration; in Ailey's words, "For Lester, his art was much more important than the colour of a dancer's skin".



After Horton's sudden death due to a heart attack in 1953, Ailey, just twenty-two, temporarily took over the directorship of the company and choreographed three original ballets (*Creation of the World*, *According to St. Francis*, and *Mourning Morning*). Five years later, when he founded his new company, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ailey took with him not only several dancers from Horton's company, including his friend Carmen de Lavallade and Joyce Trisler, but also the Horton Technique. It was to become the technical foundation for the newly hatched AAADT, and remains a focal point for dancers' training at the Ailey School to this day. The technique trains muscle and joint strength and resistance, spine mobility in the spirals and twists, and it traces precise, recognisable lines through "flat backs" and "laterals": this training allows the dancer to tackle a range of styles and continue a repertoire that straddles tradition and modernity. Works such as *Revelations* (1960), *Cry* (1971) and *Night Creature* (1974) show clearly how the structure and versatility of the Horton Technique shaped Ailey's choreographic language.



Jacqueline Green, AAADT, in Ailey's "Cry" (© Paul Kolnik) and Alvin Ailey Dance Company in "Night Creature" (© Gert Krautbauer)

My master was an American Choreographer named Lester Horton. Horton discovered me, taught me everything I know, and he left his mark on my technique and my ideas. In everything I am and everything I do, there is, I hope, the lifeblood of his message.

Alvin Ailey

Today, the Horton Technique is taught on a daily basis at the Ailey School, through figures such as Tracy Inman who preserve and transmit its principles whilst adapting them to contemporary requirements.

In the 1970s, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater entered a phase of expansion and consolidation. Ailey grew the company's repertoire, commissioning works from both emerging and acclaimed choreographers, and creating an archive in excess of three hundred works. Ailey had founded the Ailey American Dance Theater (now The Ailey School) in 1969, and in the following decade it cemented its status as one of the world's foremost training centres, with a program that combined the



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in "Revelations" at Sadler's Wells in London, 1973 (© Evening Standard/ Hulton Archive). Above, Lester Horton (© Bob Willoughby/National Portrait Gallery/ Smithsonian)



Horton Technique with a wide range of styles. In 1974, the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble (now Ailey II) was founded, with the intention of giving opportunities to young dancers and disseminating dance in broader settings, from schools to local communities.

The 1980s brought further institutional recognition: the company received official invitations to represent the United States abroad, consolidating Ailey's role as a reference figure not only in artistic terms, but on a political and cultural level too. In parallel, Ailey stepped up his educational and community work, laying the foundations for AileyCamp: a program for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The project saw the light of day shortly before his death.

After Ailey died, in 1989, the company found a natural leader in Judith Jamison: as an extraordinary performer and collaborator of Ailey's, Jamison cemented the company's international reputation, keeping its historic repertoire alive whilst opening it up to new voices. Alongside Ailey's artistic legacy Jamison, who died in 2014, also brought an approach and belief that dance could have a transformative power on a social level too: "Dance can elevate our human experience beyond words". In her autobiography, *Danc-*

ing Spirit, Jamison wrote, "Dancing is bigger than the physical body. Think bigger than that. When you extend your arm, it doesn't stop at the end of your fingers, because you're dancing bigger than that. You're dancing spirit".

Today, the company is led by Alicia Graf Mack, previously an Ailey dancer and director of the dance department at Juilliard. Her leadership makes a new phase in which tradition is interwoven with innovation. Graf Mack has spoken about seeing the famous solo *Cry* as a young girl, which Ailey dedicated "to all black women everywhere", and having been deeply affected by it: "Seeing this woman go on a journey from struggle to triumph... it really moved me".

This experience led her to imagine a career in which dance would be not only art, but testimony and representation too: themes that were already central to Ailey's vision.

In a nation that is grappling with attacks and debates on social justice, gender equality and inclusion, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater continues on its pathway of equity and plurality: a space where dance is for everyone, where memory shapes the future, and where movement is always a political and poetic act. •

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in "Blues Suite" by Alvin Ailey, title that marked the birth of the company in 1958 (© Paul Kolnik)



Tracy Inman on the Horton Technique For dance that puts the person at the centre



Tracy Inman (© Nir Arieli)

A leading figure in dance education, Tracy Inman has long dedicated his career to training generations of artists at the Ailey School in New York, of which he is the co-director. His experience and commitment have helped to spread and consolidate the Horton Technique, the founding language of modern dance and a pillar of Alvin Ailey's legacy. In this interview, Inman shares some thoughts on the Horton Technique in anticipation of the new Ailey Teacher Certification Program, offering a privileged glimpse into how tradition and innovation can coexist and support the most contemporary dance.

What drew you personally to Horton, and how has it shaped your own artistry? I was introduced to the Horton Technique as a Scholarship student at The Ailey School. It was the ingenious structure and methodology that was so fascinating to me. I was amazed that it seemed to work with anybody in the studio.

Which specific aspects of the Horton Technique do you consider foundational for dancers? The fundamental elements of the warm-up like Flat Back Series, Lateral Stretches, Deep Lunges, Coccyx Balance, and Parallel Leg Swings are critical for dancers as it establishes a solid foundation to prepare artists for the more challenging elements of the technique.

How does the Horton Technique prepare dancers for versatility across styles? The Ailey Horton Technique prepares dancers across various styles by increasing their ability to comprehend and explore movement from a holistic point of view. It provides the dancer with the skills to interpret, dissect and explore the many ways the body can move in different styles of dance.

What challenges do students typically face when first learning Horton, and how to guide them through those? Typically, students struggle with finding the Lateral "I" position which requires one leg to be parallel and the other to be turned-out while stretching the body in a horizontal plane. Through repetition and a methodical approach using the Horton studies, fortifications, and preludes, students develop incredible strength with long lean muscles and controlled flexibility to support long term technical growth.

How do you adapt Horton training for dancers with different body types, backgrounds, or prior training? The Ailey Horton Technique adds an additional level of technical support that works perfectly in conjunction with other dance techniques and needs no adaptation.

What aspects of Horton's approach to inclusivity and diversity in dance resonate most with you as an educator? What resonates with me most is Lester Horton's ability to see beyond race, culture, background, or gender. He embraced "PEOPLE" first and foremost.

How do you see Horton's legacy continuing to evolve in contemporary dance companies worldwide? I believe it is up to dance instructors and choreographers of all styles and types of dance to not only teach, but to educate the next generation of artists about the history and legacy of traditional modern dance techniques. It is



Students of the Ailey School Professional Division (© Nir Arieli)

important to understand that many elements of contemporary dance have a direct correlation to traditional modern dance techniques like the Horton Technique and others. With this knowledge, students are better prepared to approach contemporary choreography with finely tuned skills to elevate the quality of the work.

What is the relationship with music in the Horton Technique? Being aware of music is crucial in this technique, as many of the studies have varying musical cues within. It challenges the dancers to explore time signature, tempo, rhythm, dynamics, tone, and pitch. Music is key in elevating a level of artistry in the dancer.



Class at the Ailey Teacher Certification Program (© Jada Alfred)

The Ailey School has just launched the "Ailey Teacher Certification Program". Can you tell us about it? The Ailey Teacher Certification Program: Ailey Horton Technique is a new professional development program that invites participants to deepen their understanding of the Ailey Horton Technique, preparing them to teach with confidence and become a part of the Ailey legacy. Alvin Ailey's mentor, Lester Horton, established the Horton technique, which became the basis of many of Mr. Ailey's works. The Ailey Horton Technique – a development of Lester Horton's Technique as it has been practiced and taught at The Ailey School for over 50 years – provides a strong physical foundation for dancers, preparing them for versatile and sustainable careers. In this groundbreaking program, participants will undertake an in-depth study of the Ailey Horton Technique, learning comprehensive pedagogical approaches and teaching principles. Participants will further enrich their understanding of the technique by studying how Mr. Ailey incorporated it into his choreographic works, including *Revelations*. Through a combination of physical practice, independent study, and group discussion taking place in-person and online, the Ailey Teacher Certification Program: Ailey Horton Technique develops in educators an expanded level of confidence and awareness in their teaching practice. This certification prepares teachers to communicate with artistic integrity and gain an elevated awareness of movement, musicality, and storytelling, allowing them to foster similar transformations among their own students. •

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ROME DANCE SEASON
BY ORBITA SPELLBOUND

MARCH 2, 2026
h 20.30 / TEATRO AMBRA JOVINELLI

RHAPSODY IN BLUE
IRATXE ANSA E IGOR BACOVICH /
CCN ATERBALLETO

HOLY SHIFT
MAURO ASTOLFI /
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