ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER



2025–26 Press Kit

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Photo by Alice Castro.

Founded by Alvin Ailey on March 30, 1958, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is one of the most acclaimed dance companies in the world. With a repertory that boasts close to 300 works by more than 100 choreographers, it has performed in more than 71 countries on six continents and has been designated a "vital American Cultural Ambassador to the World" by a US Congressional resolution.

Forged during a pivotal moment in the civil rights movement, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was established to uplift the African American experience and furthers the American modern dance tradition while transcending boundaries of race, faith, and nationality with its universal humanity. As the company grew, Mr. Ailey invited dancers of all backgrounds to be a part of his vision while reimagining his company as a "library of dance," a home for a wide range of choreographers' works that might otherwise be lost—the first modern dance company of its kind. He expanded the global audience for dance with his visionary model and technically dazzling works.

Before his untimely death in 1989, Mr. Ailey named Judith Jamison as his successor, who for 21 years brought the Company to unprecedented success—including two historic engagements in South Africa and a 50- city global tour celebrating the company's 50th anniversary. In 2005, her idea of a permanent home for AILEY was realized with the opening of The Joan Weill Center for Dance, the largest building dedicated to dance in New York City.

Alicia Graf Mack, widely celebrated for her dance artistry during her years with the company, was appointed Artistic Director of AILEY in July 2025. In announcing the appointment, she said, "It's the honor of a lifetime to step into this role and continue the legacy of Alvin Ailey—a legacy rooted in celebrating the beauty and resilience of the human spirit. I am committed to preserving the company's rich heritage while boldly exploring new voices and perspectives that push the boundaries of dance and reflect the world we live in today, and the world we hope to see."

Today, through the remarkable artistry of 32 extraordinary dancers, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater continues to bring joy and elation to audiences around the globe, while expanding its repertory with works by new choreographers and upholding Mr. Ailey's legacy for future generations.

For further information, visit
Pressroom.AlvinAiley.org

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER IS APPLAUDED BY AUDIENCES AND CRITICS ALIKE

"Nothing prepares you for the totality of Alvin Ailey: the aural, visual, physical, spiritual beauty…Heaven…Everywhere you looked: sensory pleasure…"
– THE NEW YORK TIMES, ZADIE SMITH

"Five Stars. The pioneering company's warmth and athletic grace is showcased in a selection of old and new work. There's something generous about Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. It's there in the dancing – full of skill, passion and a charismatic warmth"
– THE GUARDIAN, SARAH CROMPTON

"In its sixty-year history, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre has enjoyed an inspiring ascent from hardscrabble origins to a long, still unchallenged reign as America's most popular dance company…"
— THE NEW YORKER

"…how fabulously individual the dancers all are. Each is an immediately distinct character…"
— THE NEW YORK TIMES



In accordance with choreographer Alvin Ailey's dictum that "dance is for everybody," AILEY offers performances, training, classes, and community programs through our five divisions: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ailey II, The Ailey School, Ailey Extension, and Ailey Arts In Education & Community Programs. Using the American modern dance tradition and the beauty of the African American cultural heritage, AILEY enlightens, unites, and inspires all people.



AILEY II

Founded in 1974 as the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble, Ailey II has advanced Alvin Ailey's vision by giving early-career dancers the vital experience of transitioning from training as a student to becoming a professional dancer. Led by Artistic Director Francesca Harper, Ailey II is forging a new path for modern dance—one that's inclusive, experimental, and transformative.



THE AILEY SCHOOL

Founded in 1969, The Ailey School has grown into a world-renowned educational institution, led by Co-Directors Tracy Inman and Melanie Person. The School's innovative programs echo Alvin Ailey's philosophy, providing students with the highest caliber of multidisciplinary training while encouraging them to explore their own creative voice.
Click for overview video.



THE AILEY/FORDHAM BFA

The Ailey/Fordham BFA in Dance is a four-year joint program offering professional dance training at The Ailey School and an exceptional liberal arts education rooted in the Jesuit tradition of intellectual development and personal attention at Fordham University.



AILEY EXTENSION

Ailey Extension offers open dance and fitness classes taught in-person and online by renowned instructors for people of all ages, backgrounds, and experience levels – from absolute beginners to professionals. Adult classes are available seven days a week in a wide variety of styles including ballet, hip hop, contemporary, Pilates, West African, and more. Ailey Extension also offers kids and teens classes, performance opportunities, and private group classes. Click for b-roll of classes.



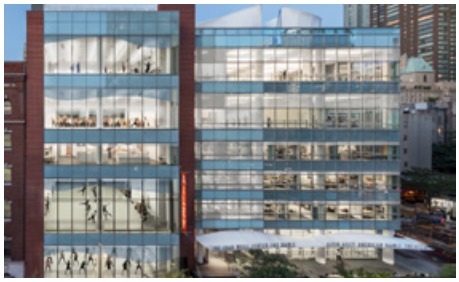
ARTS IN EDUCATION & COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

Ailey Arts In Education & Community Programs (AAIE) cultivates and energizes youth and older adults to take, make, and see dance. Through our pioneering outreach programs, we reach over 10,000 participants each year, partnering with hundreds of schools, older adult facilities, and community organizations. Expanding on Alvin Ailey's vision of sharing dance with the world, we inspire people to explore their own creativity and experience the joy of movement. Click for AileyDance for Active Aging video.



AILEYCAMP

AileyCamp is an innovative six-week summer day camp run by AAIE for young people ages 11–14. The program helps youth explore their creativity and develop their self-confidence in an atmosphere of warmth, respect, and trust. More than a dance program, AileyCamp provides children with an invaluable opportunity to master their bodies and strengthen their respect for themselves and others within a supportive framework. AileyCamp is currently operating in 10 cities nationwide, including New York City. Click for overview video.

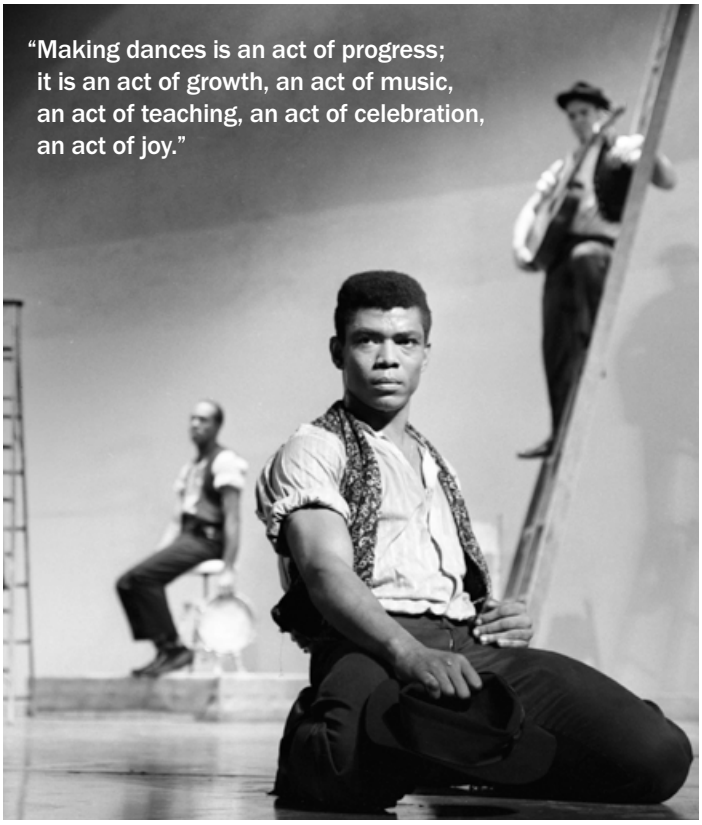


AILEY'S HOME

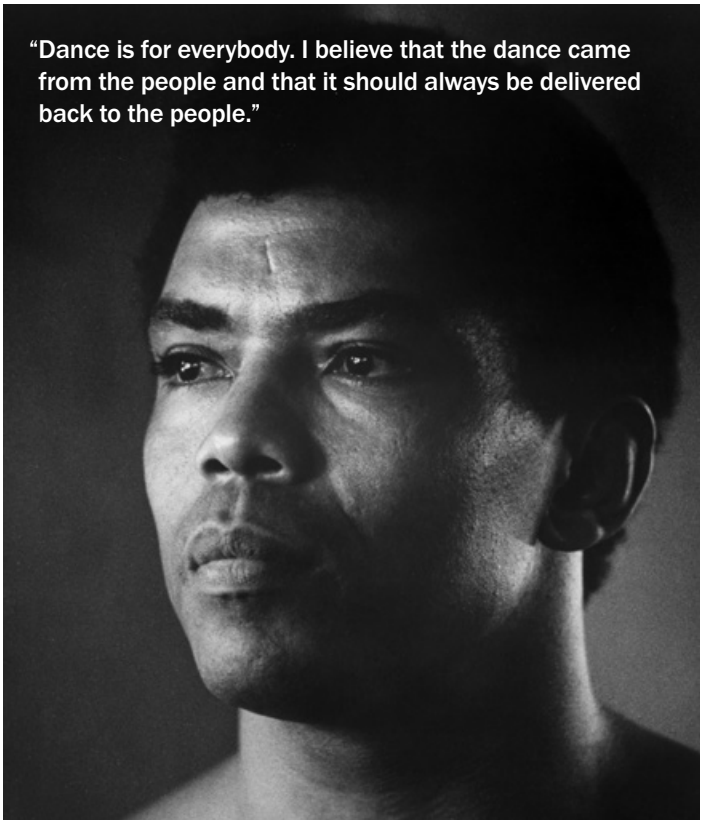
In 2005, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater opened its permanent home, The Joan Weill Center for Dance, on 55th Street and 9th Avenue in Manhattan. The striking glass-enclosed building is the largest building dedicated to dance in New York City, the dance capital of the world. In 2017, the Elaine Wynn and Family Education Wing added three floors to the west side of the building, including four dance studios to reach a total of 16, two flexible classrooms, and much more.

Left to right: Alvin Ailey. Photo by Normand Maxon; Ailey II's C. Moulterie A. Jordan K. Moore. Photo by Nir Arieli; Students from The Ailey School Professional Division. Photo by Nir Arieli; Ailey/Fordham BFA Student in Surging by Janice Rosario. Photo by Danica Paulos; Hip Hop at Ailey Extension Photo by Whitney Browne; AIE's Sherece Hill leading a West African Workshop at Jackie Robinson Park, AMNY 2022. Photo by Rob DeMartin; AileyCamp Newark final performance 2023. Photo by Danica Paulos; The Joan Weill Center for Dance with the Elaine Wynn & Family Education Wing. © Frederick Charles, fcharles.com

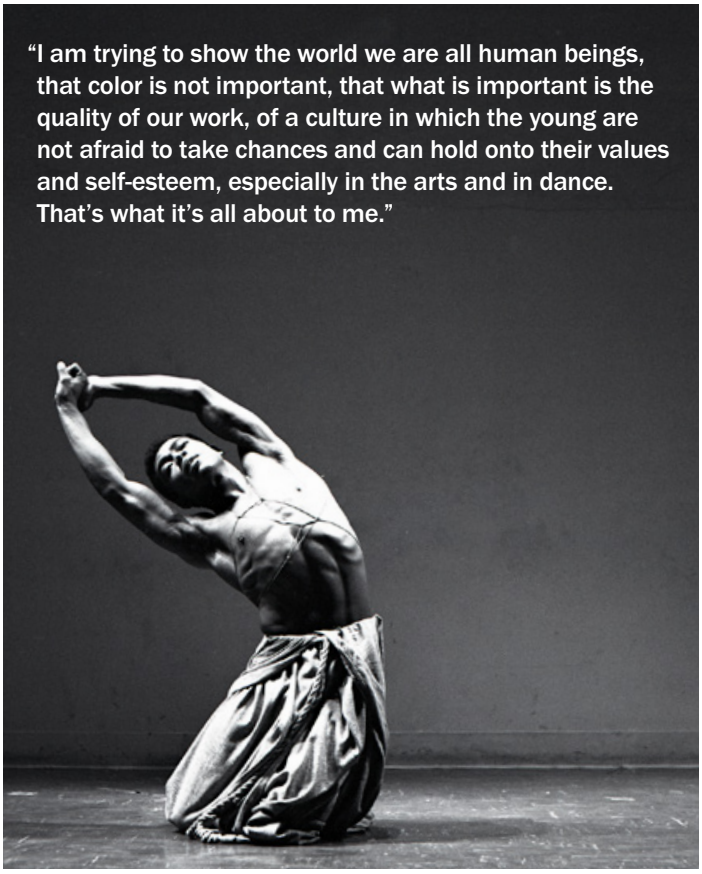
ALVIN AILEY IN HIS OWN WORDS



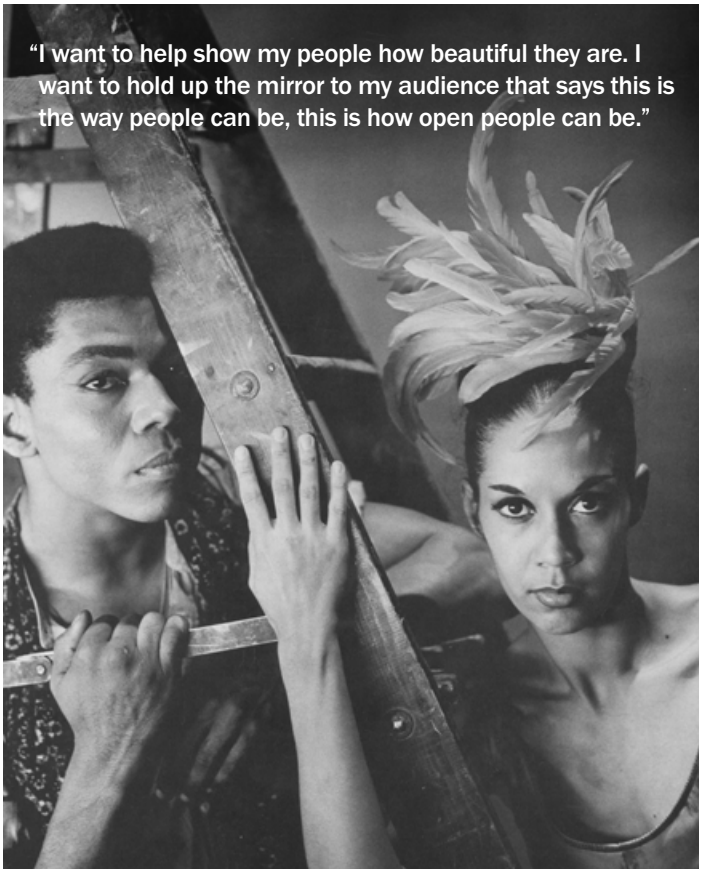
"Making dances is an act of progress; it is an act of growth, an act of music, an act of teaching, an act of celebration, an act of joy."



"Dance is for everybody. I believe that the dance came from the people and that it should always be delivered back to the people."



"I am trying to show the world we are all human beings, that color is not important, that what is important is the quality of our work, of a culture in which the young are not afraid to take chances and can hold onto their values and self-esteem, especially in the arts and in dance. That's what it's all about to me."



"I want to help show my people how beautiful they are. I want to hold up the mirror to my audience that says this is the way people can be, this is how open people can be."



Alvin Ailey in *Hermit Songs*. Photo by Jack Mitchell. © Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation Inc. and Smithsonian Institution



ALVIN AILEY FOUNDER

Alvin Ailey was born on January 5, 1931, in Rogers, Texas where he grew up with his mother, working in cotton fields and witnessing the river baptisms at their local church—experiences that would later inspire some of his most memorable ballets. It was after moving to Los Angeles that he experienced concert dance for the first time, seeing performances by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and the Katherine Dunham Dance Company. Soon after, his close friend, the extraordinary dancer Carmen de Lavallade, convinced him to formally train under Lester Horton, the founder of one of the first racially integrated dance companies in the United States. With a keen eye for talent, Horton became a mentor to Mr. Ailey. After Horton's passing in 1953, Mr. Ailey became the director of the Lester Horton Dance Theater and began to choreograph his own works. The following year, he moved to New York City, where he performed in four Broadway shows—including House of Flowers and Jamaica—and continued to develop his choreography.

In 1958, Mr. Ailey founded Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to carry out his vision of a company dedicated to uplifting the African American experience while enriching and preserving the legacy of modern dance. The creation of his masterpiece Revelations in 1960 cemented his reputation as a choreographer of unique vision, with the ability to transcend racial barriers and connect deeply to people's humanity. Mr. Ailey established the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center (now The Ailey School) in 1969 and formed the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble (now Ailey II) in 1974. He was also a pioneer of programs promoting arts in education. In 1989, he founded AileyCamp, a summer day camp for children to explore their creativity through dance and the arts—the last initiative he spearheaded before his untimely death.

Throughout his lifetime, Mr. Ailey collaborated with other outstanding American artists including Romare Bearden, Duke Ellington, Langston Hughes, and Mary Lou Williams, to name a few. He was awarded the highest distinctions in the arts, including the Kennedy Center Honors in 1988 in recognition of his extraordinary contribution to American culture. In 2014, he posthumously received the Presidential Medal of Freedom—the country's highest civilian honor—in recognition of his contributions and commitment to civil rights and dance in America. When Mr. Ailey died on December 1, 1989, The New York Times said, "you didn't need to have known [him] personally to have been touched by his humanity, enthusiasm, and exuberance and his courageous stand for multi-racial brotherhood."

Mr. Ailey was a trailblazer, a man fully dedicated to his art form who generously shared his passion with everyone he encountered, from artists to audiences. His legacy lives on through his ballets—which continue to resonate with millions of people—and the AILEY organization, forever dedicated to his mission of returning dance to the people.



JUDITH JAMISON ARTISTIC DIRECTOR EMERITA

Judith Jamison joined Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1965 and quickly became an international star. Over the following 15 years, Mr. Ailey created some of his most enduring roles for her, most notably the tour-de-force solo *Cry*. During the 1970s and 80s, she appeared as a guest artist with ballet companies all over the world, starred in the hit Broadway musical *Sophisticated Ladies* , and formed her own company, The Jamison Project. She returned to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1989 when Mr. Ailey asked her to succeed him as artistic director. In the 21 years that followed, she brought the Company to unprecedented heights—including two historic engagements in South Africa and a 50-city global tour to celebrate the Company's 50th anniversary.

Ms. Jamison was the recipient of numerous awards and honors, among them a Primetime Emmy Award, an American Choreography Award, a Kennedy Center Honor, a National Medal of Arts, a Bessie Award, the Phoenix Award, and the Handel Medallion. She was also listed in "The TIME 100: The World's Most Influential People" and honored by First Lady Michelle Obama at the first White House Dance Series event. In 2015, she became the 50th inductee into the Hall of Fame at the National Museum of Dance. In 2016, she received the Douglas Watt Lifetime Achievement Award from the Fred and Adele Astaire Awards.
As a highly regarded choreographer, Ms. Jamison created many celebrated works, including *Divining* (1984), *Forgotten Time* (1989), *Hymn* (1993), *HERE... NOW.* (commissioned for the 2002 Cultural Olympiad), *Love Stories* (with additional choreography by Robert Battle and Rennie Harris, 2004), and *Among Us (Private Spaces: Public Places)* (2009).

Ms. Jamison's autobiography, *Dancing Spirit*, was edited by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and published in 1993. In 2004, under Ms. Jamison's artistic directorship, her idea of a permanent home for AILEY was realized and named after beloved Chairman Emerita Joan Weill. Following her retirement from the helm of the Company in 2011, Ms. Jamison continued to dedicate herself to asserting the prominence of the arts in our culture, and she remained committed to promoting the significance of the Ailey legacy—using dance as a medium for honoring the past, celebrating the present, and fearlessly reaching into the future. Her death on November 9, 2024 prompted an outpouring of love and admiration around the world from those who were touched by her magnificent artistry and extraordinary spirit.

THE COMPANY LEADERSHIP



ALICIA GRAF MACK DARIA L. AND ERIC J. WALLACH ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Alicia Graf Mack was a star performer on the Ailey stage during a spectacular career between 2005 and 2014, when she was brought into the company and mentored by the incomparable Judith Jamison. She now returns to serve as AILEY's fourth Artistic Director, after distinguishing herself as the Dean and Director of Dance Division of The Juilliard School from 2018-2025. Born in San Jose, CA, Ms. Graf Mack grew up in Columbia, MD. She began her career with Dance Theatre of Harlem under the direction of Arthur Mitchell and ascended to become a highly recognized principal ballerina. A celebrated artist, she performed with Complexions Contemporary Ballet and made guest appearances with Alonzo King LINES Ballet. Her versatility led to collaborations with artists including Beyoncé, John Legend, Andre 3000, Alicia Keys, and Jon Batiste. Ms. Graf Mack has graced the stages of major galas and festivals, performed tributes to luminaries including Carmen de Lavallade at the 2017 Kennedy Center Honors, and danced at the memorial services for Arthur Mitchell at NYC's Riverside Church and Jessye Norman at the Metropolitan Opera House. A Columbia University graduate (magna cum laude, honors in history), she also holds an MA in nonprofit management from Washington University in St. Louis. Her accolades include an honorary doctorate from The Juilliard School in 2025, *Smithsonian Magazine's* American Innovator of the Arts and Sciences, Columbia University's Medal of Excellence, and keynote addresses at Columbia's School of General Studies in 2008 and 2025. She received the prestigious 2023 Dance Magazine Award and the 2025 Columbia Black Alumni Heritage Award. Before arriving at Juilliard, Ms. Graf Mack was an assistant professor at Webster University and an adjunct professor at the University of Houston and Washington University. She is the host and co-producer of the *Moving Moments* podcast, featuring conversations with groundbreaking artists in the field of dance.

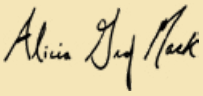
I first saw Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater when I was eight years old. It was a VHS of Donna Wood performing Alvin Ailey's *Cry*. I had never seen this kind of power and beauty—a kind in which I could see myself. It's a moment that has stayed with me my entire life.

Alvin Ailey wanted to deliver dance back to the people, and recently I've been thinking about exactly what he meant. He wanted to hold a mirror up to the audience. He imagined the theater not as a place of alienation and elitism, but of welcome and togetherness. A place to celebrate Black artistry in all its diversity and beauty. A place to feel.

We come to the theater to find new inspiration, to witness the birth of new talent, to connect to our roots, to remember what Mr. Ailey started over sixty years ago, and why his vision is as bright and essential today as it ever was. To remember how beautiful we can be.

Ailey audiences know this, and that is why we love to see you come back to the theater every year. This year's season at New York City Center will be my first as artistic director. Whether you're continuing a long-held tradition or making your first trip, I can't wait to welcome you for a season of dance that honors Mr. Ailey's gift to the world.

Thank you for joining us at the theater.
Alicia Graf Mack





MATTHEW RUSHING ASSOCIATE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

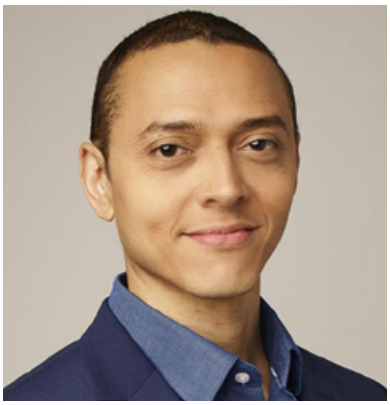
Matthew Rushing was born in Los Angeles, California. He began his dance training with Kashmir Blake in Inglewood, California, and continued his training at the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts. He is the recipient of a Spotlight Award and a Dance Magazine Award and was named a Presidential Scholar in the Arts. He was a scholarship student at The Ailey School and later became a member of Ailey II. During his career, Mr. Rushing has performed as a guest artist for galas in Vail, Colorado, as well as in Austria, Canada, France, Italy, and Russia. He has performed for Presidents George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, as well as at the 2010 White House Dance Series. During his time with the company, he has choreographed five ballets: *Acceptance In Surrender* (2005), a collaboration with Hope Boykin and Abdur-Rahim Jackson; *Uptown* (2009), a tribute to the Harlem Renaissance; *ODETTA* (2014), a celebration of "the queen of American folk music"; *Testament* (2020), a tribute to Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* created in collaboration with Clifton Brown and Yusha-Marie Sorzano; and *Sacred Songs* (2024), which resurrected and reimagined a collection of spirituals from the original 1960 version of *Revelations* that were later omitted. In 2012 he created *Moan*, which was set on PHILADANCO! and premiered at the Joyce Theater. Mr. Rushing joined the company in 1992. He became Rehearsal Director in 2010, Associate Artistic Director in 2020, and served as Interim Artistic Director 2023-2025.

THE COMPANY LEADERSHIP



BENNETT RINK EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Bennett Rink became Executive Director of AILEY in 2013. He first joined the organization as Manager of Special Events in 1994, became Development Director in 1998, and served as Senior Director of Development and External Affairs from 2007 to 2012. In his tenure overseeing Ailey's development and fundraising efforts, Mr. Rink led a major capital campaign to establish the organization's first permanent home, The Joan Weill Center for Dance, which opened in 2005 and attracts more than 200,000 visitors each year. Mr. Rink also oversaw the campaign to build the organization's endowment, which provides vital ongoing support for programmatic initiatives. When the Company celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2008, Mr. Rink supervised an 18-month celebration including events, promotions, collaborations, and special performances, bringing public awareness of the AILEY organization to new heights. During his time as Executive Director, the Company has deepened its presence in New York City by establishing an annual spring season to complement its New York City Center winter season, while also extending its role as America's "Cultural Ambassador to the World" with tours to Africa, Europe, and South America. To reach audiences beyond live performances, Mr. Rink has broadened the organization's commitment to creating film and digital content. Mr. Rink has also extended the reach and impact of AILEY's educational offerings, including the creation of new curricula and programs that reach across generations, from elementary school children to older adults. In 2017, the organization unveiled the Elaine Wynn and Family Education Wing, providing much-needed additional studios and classroom space. The building now comprises 87,000 square feet and is the largest destination for dance in New York City. In recent years, Mr. Rink has overseen a branding initiative to express the totality of AILEY's offerings, creating greater connectivity between Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ailey II, The Ailey School, Ailey Arts in Education & Community Programs, and Ailey Extension. Most recently, he led the organization's collaboration with the Whitney Museum on Edges of Ailey, the first large scale museum exhibition celebrating the life, dances, influences, and enduring legacy of Alvin Ailey. Mr. Rink is a graduate of Syracuse University and holds a BFA in theater.



CLIFTON BROWN REHEARSAL DIRECTOR

Clifton Brown, from Goodyear, Arizona, began his dance training at Take 5 Dance Academy and continued in the first class of the Ailey/Fordham BFA in Dance program. Brown began his professional career when he joined the Ailey company in 1999 and served as choreographic assistant to Judith Jamison. He has also danced with Earl Mosley's Diversity of Dance, Lar Lubovitch Dance Company, and was a founding member and rehearsal director for Jessica Lang Dance. He was nominated in the U.K. for a Critics Circle National Dance Award for Best Male Dancer and received a Black Theater Arts Award as well as a New York Dance and Performance ("Bessie") Award. As a guest artist Brown has performed with Miami City Ballet, Rome Opera Ballet, Nevada Ballet, and Parsons Dance. He has set the work of Alvin Ailey, Earl Mosley, and Jessica Lang on various companies around the world. Television appearances as a guest artist include *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Dancing With The Stars*. He has had the privilege of performing at the White House for President Obama. Brown became Assistant Rehearsal Director in 2019.



KANJI SEGAWA ASSISTANT REHEARSAL DIRECTOR & ARTISTIC PLANNING COORDINATOR

Kanji Segawa was a dancer with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater under the direction of Robert Battle from 2011–2023 and became Assistant Rehearsal Director in 2024. Originally from Kanagawa, Japan, he began his dance training with his mother Erika Akoh, studying ballet with Kan Horiuchi and Ju Horiuchi in Tokyo. Segawa was awarded the Japanese Government Artist Fellowship in 1997 to train at The Ailey School. A former member of Ailey II and Battleworks, he danced extensively for Mark Morris and performed as a principal dancer in John Adams' *Nixon in China* at The Metropolitan Opera. Since 1999, Segawa has been Creative Associate for Jessica Lang, assisting with her creations for companies worldwide including American Ballet Theatre, Pacific Northwest Ballet, The Royal Ballet, and The National Ballet of Japan, as well as at The Royal Ballet School and the Partner School Choreographic Project at Prix de Lausanne 2025. With Lang, Segawa co-choreographed the world premiere production of *Turandot* for The Washington National Opera, directed by Francesca Zambello. He has assisted Robert Battle in staging his works at institutions including Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ailey II, and The Royal Ballet School. Segawa was a nominee for *Dance Europe* magazine's Dancer of the Year 2024 for his performances with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

WHO'S WHO IN THE COMPANY



LEONARDO BRITO

(Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) began his training with Projeto Primeiro Passo and later studied at Escola Estadual de Dança Maria Olenewa, Centro de Arte Nós da Dança, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, and The Ailey School. He danced with Ailey II and then with Ballet Hispánico New York for five seasons. Brito has performed with the Mariinsky Ballet, Theatro Municipal do Rio de Janeiro, and Focus Cia de Dança. In 2015, he received the III Brazilian Modern Dance Congress Award. He has performed works by Anabelle Lopez Ochoa, Gustavo Ramírez Sansano, Cassi Abranches, and Medhi Walerski. As a multidisciplinary artist and movement director, Brito's work spans performance, fashion, and editorial projects, including credits with Número Art, Addison Rae, Willy Chavarria, Old Navy, Glossier, FX's *POSE, Out Magazine, Made in Brazil, SSAW,* and *Hong Kong Dance Magazine.* He is also proficient in capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art. He joined the company in 2024. Instagram: @leonardobrittom



MICHAEL CHERRY

(Springfield, VA) is a graduate of George Mason University, where he received a BFA in Dance with a minor in Arts Management. Cherry has had the opportunity to dance in works created or set by Rafael Bonachela, Shaun Boyle D'Arcy, Camille A. Brown, Rena Butler, Alejandro Cerrudo, Christopher d'Amboise, Fiona Jopp, Susan Shields, Doug Varone, and Manuel Vignoulle. He attended the Juilliard Summer Dance Intensive, Complexions Summer and Winter Intensives, and the LINES Ballet Summer Program. Cherry danced for two seasons (2024-2026) with Complexions Contemporary Ballet under the direction of co-founders Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson. He joined the company in 2026. Instagram: @michaelcherry12



PATRICK COKER

(Chester, VA) was awarded the American Ballet Theatre's National Trainee Scholarship from 2008 to 2010. In May 2014, Coker graduated from the Ailey School/Fordham University BFA Program, where he apprenticed with Ailey II in his final year. After graduation, he spent a year dancing for Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet, and then went on to join Jessica Lang Dance for three seasons. He has also performed with The Mark Morris Dance Group in *The Hard Nut* and L'Allegro*, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*, Earl Mosley's Diversity of Dance, HopeBoykinDance and LA-based BODYTRAFFIC. Mr. Coker joined the Company in 2019. Find him on Instagram @pcoke.



SHAWN CUSSEAUX

(St. Petersburg, Florida) began his training at the Pinellas County Center for the Arts at Gibbs High School Where he trained in ballet, modern, and jazz. In 2020, Shawn received his BFA in Modern Dance at Point Park University in Pittsburgh, PA under the direction of Garfield Lemonius. After graduation he joined BalletX, Philadelphia's premier contemporary ballet company, where he spent three seasons. During that time, he had the privilege of dancing at The Vail International Dance Festival and Ballet Sun Valley. Shawn has performed work by Jae Man Joo, José Limón, Edwaard Liang, Camille A. Brown, Matthew Nenan, Jamar Roberts, Dwight Rhoden, Hope Boykin, Amy Hall Garner, Jennifer Archibald, and Nicolo Fonte. Mr. Cusseaux joined the Company in 2023.

WHO'S WHO IN THE COMPANY



SARAH DALEY-PERDOMO

(South Elgin, IL) began training at Faubourg School of Ballet under the direction of Watmora Casey and Tatyana Mazur and furthered her studies at intensives with the Kirov Academy, Dance Theatre of Harlem, National Ballet School of Canada, and San Francisco Conservatory of Dance. She is a 2009 graduate of the Ailey/Fordham BFA in Dance program, with a minor in Journalism. Daley-Perdomo was honored to perform in Wayne McGregor's *Chroma*, filmed for *Lincoln Center at the Movies: Great American Dance*, and was featured in *Dance Magazine*'s "On the Rise" series in 2014. She is a recipient of a Youth America Grand Prix Award, an ARTS Foundation Award, and was a member of Ailey II for two years. Daley-Perdomo is the mother of one. She joined the company in 2011. Instagram: @sarahdaleyp.



CAROLINE T. DARTEY

(Geneva, Switzerland) trained in rhythmic gymnastics in her hometown at the age of five, eventually rising to national and international levels and becoming the Swiss champion in her category from 2009 to 2011. She later began dancing at the Conservatoire Populaire de Musique, Danse et Théâtre of Geneva. Ms. Dartey also trained at The Ailey School as a scholarship student and performed in Alvin Ailey's *Memoria* during Ailey's 2017 New York City Center season. She was a member of Ailey II from 2018 to 2020 and has performed works choreographed by Darrell Grand Moultrie, Uri Sands, Bradley Shelver, Troy Powell, Robert Battle, Amy Hall Garner, Kirven Douthit-Boyd, Andrea Miller, Alia Kache, and Yannick Lebrun. Ms. Dartey joined the Company in 2021. Instagram: @caroline_dartey



ISAIAH DAY

(Chicago, IL) began his dance training at New Life Covenant Southeast with Yielded Vessel Dance Ministry. He went on to study at Hubbard Street Youth Dance Center and The Chicago Academy for the Arts. A BFA graduate of The Juilliard School, Day was named a 2019 YoungArts winner in Modern/Contemporary dance and one of *Dance Magazine*'s 25 to Watch in 2025. He joined the company in 2023. Instagram: @isaiahdemarcus



SOLOMON DUMAS

(Chicago, IL) (he, him) began his lifelong journey with the Ailey organization at AileyCamp. He trained formally at The Chicago Academy for the Arts and the Russell Talbert Dance Studio — the latter proving most influential to his development — before continuing his studies at New World School of the Arts and as a Fellowship Level 1 student at The Ailey School. Dumas has performed with Garth Fagan Dance; Ronald K. Brown/EVIDENCE, A Dance Company; Labyrinth Dance Theater; and Ailey II. He was awarded Nigel Lythgoe's Dizzy Feet Foundation scholarship. His theater credits include Goodman Theatre's *Black Nativity* directed by the late Mike Malone. He has also shared the stage with recording artists Donald Lawrence, Dee Dee Bridgewater, André De Shields, and Ledisi. Dumas joined the company in 2016. Instagram: @Solomon.Dumas

WHO'S WHO IN THE COMPANY



MASON EVANS

(Margate, FL) began his dance training at Performance Edge 2, later graduating from Dreyfoos School of the Performing Arts in 2022. He was named a YoungArts winner in Modern/ Contemporary in 2021. Evans is a 2026 graduate of the Juilliard School where, under the direction of Alicia Graf Mack, he has performed works by Chanel DaSilva, José Limón, Hope Boykin, Shen Wei, Pam Tanowitz, and Aszure Barton. He joined the company in 2025 and has recently been named a 2026 Princess Grace Award Winner for Dance Performance.



SAMANTHA FIGGINS

(Washington, D.C.) began dancing at Duke Ellington School of the Arts under the tutelage of Charles Auggins and Sandra Fortune- Greene and attended summer intensives at Dance Theatre of Harlem under Arthur Mitchell. She continued her education at SUNY Purchase Conservatory of Dance, performing works by George Balanchine, Bill T. Jones, Paul Taylor, and Twyla Tharp. Upon graduating cum laude, Ms. Figgins became a member of Complexions Contemporary Ballet, performing works by Dwight Rhoden, Jae Man Joo, and Camille A. Brown. She performed at the 2014 DanceOpen Festival in St. Petersburg, Russia. Ms. Figgins was featured both on the cover of Dance Spirit magazine and in Pointe magazine's "10 Careers to Watch". She has worked with Beyoncé and in the film *Enemy Within* alongsideTiler Peck and Matthew Rushing. Ms. Figgins had the pleasure of performing with Judith Jamison for TEDTalk 2019. Ms. Figgins joined the Company in 2014. Follow her on Instagram @sfigg_udigg.



SEBASTIAN GARCIA

(Bronx, NY) started dancing at AileyCamp New York under the direction of Nasha Thomas and began his formal dance training at the Harlem School of the Arts under the direction of Aubrey Lynch. He was later accepted into the ABT Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School under the direction of Cynthia Harvey. He also received the En Avant Award from 2017-2018, which enabled him to work with choreographers including Jessica Lang and Alexei Ratmansky. Garcia continued his training at the Rock School for Dance Education in Philadelphia under the direction of Bo and Stephanie Spassoff. He has danced for the Black Iris Project and has worked on Broadway projects with the Lyric Opera of Chicago and at Carnegie Hall. He was a member of the Collage Dance Collective for four seasons, performing works by Wayne McGregor, George Balanchine, Christopher Huggins, Durante Verzola, Sandra Holloway, and Nacho Duato. Garcia joined the company in 2025.



JAMES GILMER

(Pittsburgh, PA) trained at Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre School, the Pittsburgh Creative and Performing Arts School, Point Park University, and the Chautauqua School of Dance. After graduating from high school, he performed with Texture Contemporary Ballet, then joined Cincinnati Ballet where he performed under the direction of Victoria Morgan for six seasons. Gilmer also performed and toured as a member of Amy Seiwert's Imagery and ODC/dance based in San Francisco. He has performed in both of New York City Center's productions celebrating Twyla Tharp (2021 and 2022) as well as multiple occurrences of the annual Fall for Dance Festival. He joined the company in 2019.

WHO'S WHO IN THE COMPANY



ASHLEY KAYLYNN GREEN

(Charleston, SC) began her training at Columbia City Jazz where she found her love for dance. She trained in a variety of styles including ballet, modern, jazz, tap, and hip hop. In 2020, Green received her BFA in Dance from Point Park University in Pittsburgh, PA, under the direction of Garfield Lemonius. There, she performed works by Peter Chu, Aszure Barton, Kyle Abraham, and Darrell Grand Moultrie. After graduation, she joined Whim W'Him Seattle Contemporary Dance where she received a Princess Grace Award in Dance. Green joined the company in 2021 and that year she was named one of "25 to Watch" by *Dance Magazine.* She has performed her own improvisational work at Into the Open Music Festival and Amalgamation and has created work with McKoy Dance Project, Jonah Bokaer Arts Foundation, and Arkansas Ballet.



JACQUELIN HARRIS

(Charlotte, NC) began her dance training at Dance Productions Studios under the direction of Lori Long. Harris received a silver ARTS award from YoungArts National Foundation for the Advancement of the Arts and was a Presidential Scholar in the Arts semifinalist. She graduated with honors from the Ailey/Fordham BFA in Dance program. In 2016, Harris was named one of "25 to Watch" by *Dance Magazine*. She received a 2017 dance fellowship from the Princess Grace Foundation-USA. Harris has performed as a guest artist with Twyla Tharp, the Merce Cunningham Trust, and Roderick George's kNoname Artists. Most recently, Harris won a 2025 Bessie Award for outstanding Performer. She was a member of Ailey II and joined the company in 2014.



YANNICK LEBRUN

(Cayenne, French Guiana) began training in his native country at the Adaclam School under the guidance of Jeanine Verin. After graduating high school in 2004, he moved to New York City to study at The Ailey School as a scholarship student. Lebrun was named one of *Dance Magazine's* "25 to Watch" in 2011, and in 2013 *France-Amérique* magazine highlighted him as one of the 50 most talented French people in the United States. In November 2016, Lebrun was a guest performer with The Royal Ballet in Wayne McGregor's *Chroma*. In 2019, he choreographed *Saa Magni*, his first work for Ailey II. For ABT Studio Company he created *Lora* in 2021 and *Human* in 2024. He was a nominee for the 2024 UK Critic's Circle National Dance Award for outstanding male modern performance in *Dancing Spirit*. Lebrun was a member of Ailey II and joined the company in 2008. Instagram: @yannicklebrun



XAVIER MACK

(Washington, DC) began his dance training at Divine Dance Institute in Capitol Heights, MD. He went on to earn his BA in Modern Language and Linguistics from the University of Maryland-Baltimore County. After graduation, he performed with Dallas Black Dance Theatre for five seasons. Mack has been featured as a guest artist in benefit concerts and festivals including The Royal Ballet's *Legacy*, TITAS/DANCE UNBOUND, Dance Fest Skopje, FINTDAZ, and Jacob's Pillow Dance. He also had the pleasure of dancing alongside legendary soprano Kathleen Battle in her concert *Underground Railroad: A Spiritual Journey.* Mack has performed works by Norbert De La Cruz III, Hope Boykin, Hans van Manen, Aszure Barton, and Ronald K. Brown. He joined the company in 2022. Instagram: @x.mack

WHO'S WHO IN THE COMPANY



RENALDO MAURICE

(Gary, IN) began his training with Tony Washington and graduated from Talent Unlimited High School. He attended Emerson School for Visual and Performing Arts, studying with Larry Brewer. Mr. Maurice was a scholarship student at The Ailey School, Ballet Chicago, Deeply Rooted Dance Theater, and Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance. He received second place in modern dance from the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts and received the Dizzy Feet Foundation Scholarship. In 2012 he was honored with the key to the city of his hometown. Mr. Maurice has choreographed and performed with Grammy nominated artist Jazzmeia Horn. He is the 2022 Willie Ninja Supreme Award Recipient and star of HBO Max's *Legendary*. He has also incorporated his passion for the arts with social responsibility as the co-artistic director of Indiana's South Shore Dance Alliance. He was a member of Ailey II and joined the Company in 2011. Facebook: @Maurice Gardner. Instagram: @mauricerenaldo



JESSE OBREMSKI

(New York, NY) (he/they) trained at The Ailey School, Jacob's Pillow, Springboard Danse, and Earl Mosley's Diversity of Dance. A graduate of LaGuardia High School and The Juilliard School, Obremski has performed with Kate Weare Dance, Brian Brooks Moving Company, Peter Stathas Dance, Lar Lubovitch Dance Company, Buglisi Dance Theatre, Limón Dance Company, and Gibney Company, among others. His performances include the 2019 FINA World Championships and the White House for President Obama. Highlighted in *The New York Time*s, on NY1, and in *Dance Magazine*'s "On the Rise" (2019), Obremski received a NYSCA/NYFA 2025 Choreography Fellowship, Asian American Arts Alliance's 2016 Jadin Wong Award, and achieved Boy Scout Eagle Scout rank. Obremski, Founder/Artistic Director of Obremski/Works Inc., has presented choreography in North and South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa, notably at The Kennedy Center, Lincoln Center, and Fall for Dance North with companies including Obremski/Works, Gibney Company's Company Created, Buglisi Dance Theatre, and WGRUV Dance Company. He joined the company in 2024. jesseobremski.com. obremskiworks.org. Instagram: @jesse_obremski



CORRIN RACHELLE MITCHELL

(Baltimore, MD) began her dance training in her hometown at LeRe's Performing Arts Center, owned by her mother and father. She attended Baltimore School for the Arts where she trained with Norma Pera and Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell. Ms. Mitchell graduated in 2017 with a BFA in Dance from Point Park University where she worked with choreographers Troy Powell, Garfield Lemonius, and Debbie Allen. After completing one year of apprenticeship, Ms. Mitchell joined Ailey II in 2017 where she performed works choreographed by Uri Sands, Bradley Shelver, Troy Powell, Robert Battle, Darrell Grand Moultrie, and Amy Hall Garner. Ms. Mitchell joined the Company in 2019. Instagram: @_slimrin_



KALI MARIE OLIVER

(Akron, OH) began her dance training with her mother and went on to train at Nan Klinger's Excellence in Dance. She attended summer intensives at Chautauqua Institution, Alonzo King LINES Ballet, and The Ailey School. Oliver graduated magna cum laude from the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program in Dance. Upon graduating, she worked closely with Karole Armitage as a guest artist with Armitage Gone! Dance. Oliver spent three seasons in Ailey II under the direction of Francesca Harper, during which time she performed in the Holland Dance Festival. She has had the privilege of performing works by Alvin Ailey, William Forsythe, Robert Battle, Andrea Miller, Anna Sokolow, Elizabeth Roxas-Dobrish, William Isaac, Baye & Asa, and Maurya Kerr. She was honored to be a guest artist during Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's 2023 New York City Center season and was thrilled to officially join the company in 2024. Instagram: @kmo_98

WHO'S WHO IN THE COMPANY



ALISHA RENA PEEK

(Upper Marlboro, MD) is a graduate of the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program in Dance, and recently earned her MBA from the University of Maryland Global Campus. Peek began her formal dance training at the Washington School of Ballet and continued at the Kirov Ballet Academy, Dance Theatre of Harlem Kennedy Center Residency, and The Art of Technique. Professionally, Peek has danced in Ailey II, taught Horton in The Ailey School's Junior Division, served as an assistant to Milton Myers and Hope Boykin, participated in the HopeBoykinDance Bubble Residency, and performed in both *An Evening Of Hope* and *Moments By Hope*. Peek appeared in the hit FX series *POSE* and choreographed a short film produced by BEATS by Dre. She joined the company in 2022. Instagram @alishapeek



JESSICA AMBER PINKETT

(Baltimore, MD) began her dance training at Baltimore Dance Tech under the direction of Stephanie Powell. She graduated from George Washington Carver Center for Arts and Technology and earned a BFA with honors in dance performance and choreography from Towson University. She has had the privilege of performing works by Alvin Ailey, Judith Jamison, Tally Beatty, Camille A. Brown, Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell, Jamar Roberts, and others. She has performed as a guest artist with The Black Iris Project and was a member of Ailey II from 2016-2018. Pinkett made her New York choreographic debut and performed alongside Madison McFerrin in *OPEN AIR*. In 2023, she led the world premiere of HopeBoykinDance's *States Of Hope* at the Joyce Theater. She was a member of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater from 2018-2021 and rejoined the Company in 2024. She continues exploring the depths of her artistry as a freelancer, teacher, choreographer, and filmmaker. Instagram: @jessica.a.pinkett



MIRANDA QUINN

(Baltimore, MD) (she/her) trained in various genres of dance from ages 2–18 at Mid-Atlantic Center for the Performing Arts under the artistic direction of Shannon McHale. Quinn graduated from The Juilliard School in 2019 under the direction of Alicia Graf Mack. Her attendance at the school was made possible by the Jerome L. Greene Fellowship. She joined the company in 2019. Since then, she has had the privilege of performing works by renowned choreographers including Alvin Ailey, Azure Barton, Jamar Roberts, Kyle Abraham, Lar Lubovitch, Matthew Neenan, Rennie Harris, Robert Battle, Ronald K. Brown, and Twyla Tharp. Quinn is extremely grateful and honored to be part of the AILEY community and legacy. She sends a special shout out to her husband for illuminating the stage!



TYRONE REESE

(Mobile, AL) (he/him) is a proud alumnus of The Juilliard School and a 2020 YoungArts Winner in Ballet. At Juilliard, he performed works by choreographers including Ohad Naharin, Aszure Barton, Rena Butler, Jamar Roberts, and Tiler Peck. Reese made his Broadway debut in Illinoise, choreographed and directed by Justin Peck, and later served as a universal swing and dance captain on the First National Tour of MJ: The Musical. He has performed at New York City's Fall for Dance Festival with kNoname Artist under the direction of Roderick George. Through his artistry, he hopes to inspire young Black people to embrace the fullness of who they are and to see the arts as a space for expression, excellence, liberation, and joy. Reese joined the company in 2026. IG: @its.tyrone_

WHO'S WHO IN THE COMPANY



HANNAH ALISSA RICHARDSON

(Toronto, Ontario Canada) graduated with honors from The Ailey School Certificate Program and danced with Ailey II for one season before joining the company in 2022. She has performed works by William Forsythe, Robert Battle, and Jamar Roberts. Richardson was featured at the Holland Dance Festival and in the world premiere of *Grace* and *Mercy* by Ronald K. Brown at Bard SummerScape. She was also a featured dancer in the inaugural *Vogue World* event and *FUTURE's DS2 Remixed: The Ballet*, choreographed by Ebony Williams. Her screen credits include *Every Day* by Orion Pictures, Disney Channel's *Backstage*, and the Creative Arts Emmy/Webby Award-winning film *Echoes of Ailey*, directed by Ezra Hurwitz with movement direction by Francesca Harper in collaboration with the Whitney Museum. Through movement, she aims to tell stories that connect, heal, and honor the cultures that have shaped her. Richardson is honored to be part of AILEY and is deeply thankful for the continued support of her community. Instagram: @hannahxrichardson



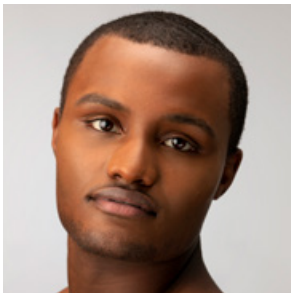
CONSTANCE STAMATIOU

(Charlotte, NC) began her dance training at Pat Hall's Dance Unlimited and North Carolina Dance Theatre. She graduated from Northwest School of the Arts and studied at SUNY Purchase and as a Fellowship student at The Ailey School. In 2009, Stamatiou received the Leonore Annenberg Fellowship. In 2022, she was one of *Sports Illustrated's* "Top 100," and in 2023, she was nominated for the UK Critic's Circle National Dance Award for outstanding female modern performance in *Cry*. She has performed at the White House, in a TED Talk with Judith Jamison, and has appeared on *So You Think You Can Dance, Dancing with the Stars,* Logo's *Trailblazer Honors, Elle's* movement series, *The View*, and *The Jennifer Hudson Show*. Stamatiou has danced in the films *Shake, Rattle & Roll, Bolden* and the commercial *I Love NY*. She is a mother of two. Stamatiou was a member of Ailey II and joined the company in 2007. Instagram: @constance.stamatiou



DEIDRE ROGAN

(Fort Myers, FL) began her dance training in Fort Myers, Florida under Melinda Roy, Roberto Munoz, and Cheryl Copeland. Deidre graduated with honors from the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program in Dance in 2015. She is a YoungArts scholarship winner, performed as a United States Arts Ambassador for President Barack Obama during the Opening Ceremony of the Hannover Messe, and was the Associate Choreographer under Choreographer Hope Boykin for the City Center Encores Off-Center production of Promenade in 2019. Rogan danced with Ailey II from 2014 to 2016 and with Parsons Dance from 2016 to 2022. She joined the company in 2022. Instagram: @deidre_rogan



CHRISTOPHER TAYLOR

(Newark, New Jersey) started his dance training at The Ailey School when he was 11. He later attended Arts High School in Newark. During his training, he attended AileyCamp Newark, performing numerous times at The Apollo Theater and Lincoln Center in works by Rennie Harris, Robert Battle, and other choreographers. After graduating from Arts High School, Taylor received a scholarship to The Ailey School's Professional Division. In 2022, he joined Ailey II under artistic director Francesca Harper and went on to perform works by Ms. Harper, William Forsythe, Andrea Miller, and Robert Battle. He joined the company in 2022.

WHO'S WHO IN THE COMPANY



MAHALAYA TINTIANGCO–CUBALES

(San Francisco, CA) (she/her) is a proud Filipina American. She started her dance journey at the Westlake School for the Performing Arts where she trained in hip hop, ballet, contemporary, modern, jazz, and Filipino and Pacific Islander dance forms. Tintiangco-Cubales received a BFA in Dance from the Juilliard School. She has performed works by Chanel DaSilva, José Limón, Jamar Roberts, Hope Boykin, Kyle Abraham, Jermaine Spivey, Pam Tanowitz, William Forsythe, Marco Goecke, Crystal Pite, Sir Wayne McGregor, and Alvin Ailey. Tintiangco-Cubales's passion for dance also extends to centering marginalized narratives. She aspires to continually explore her artistic voice through her identity while also providing parallel opportunities to other artists. She joined the company in 2026.



ISABEL WALLACE GREEN

(Houston, TX) began her dance training at Houston Ballet Academy where she studied for nine years. She graduated summa cum laude from the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program in Dance with a double major in Dance and African/African American Studies. She performed with New Chamber Ballet, Urban Souls Dance Company, and was an ensemble member of *The Radio City Christmas Spectacular.* Wallace-Green joined DBDT: Encore! before joining Dallas Black Dance Theatre in 2021. While living in Texas, she partnered with University of Houston and Texas Southern University art museums to premiere her first solo show, *Resilience*. Wallace-Green joined the company in 2023.



DANDARA VEIGA

(Alegrete, RS, Brazil) began her dance training at Social Project Primeiros Passos before receiving a scholarship to her hometown school, Escola de Dança Ballerina. She also studied at Studio Margarita Fernandez in Argentina, Opus Ballet in Italy, Annarella Academia de Ballet e Dança in Portugal, and as a scholarship student at The Ailey School in 2016. From 2017 to 2023, Veiga danced with Ballet Hispánico New York, where she originated the title role in Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's *Doña Perón*, featured on PBS's *NEXT* at the *Kennedy Center* series. In 2023–24, she was a soloist with The Metropolitan Opera and performed with Site-Specific Dances, Opus Ballet, Noname, and the Black Iris Project. Veiga was named one of *Dance Magazine*'s "25 to Watch" in 2023. She has worked with artists including Charla Genn, Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, Noah Gelber, Gustavo Ramírez Sansano, Edwaard Liang, Christopher Huggins, Ray Mercer, and Ebony Williams. Veiga joined the company in 2024. Instagram: @iamdandaraveiga



CHRISTOPHER R. WILSON

(Augusta, GA) is a graduate of John S. Davidson Fine Arts Magnet School and graduated *cum laude* from the Ailey/Fordham BFA in Dance program. He also trained at Colton Ballet School, Alonzo King LINES Ballet, and The School at Jacob's Pillow before beginning his professional career with BH*dos*, the second company of Ballet Hispánico New York. He has performed works by choreographers Judith Jamison, Alonzo King, Wayne McGregor, Camille A. Brown, and Hans van Manen, among others. He has performed as a guest artist for The Royal Ballet's Legacy Project, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Essence Festival, and with The Black Iris Project, starring in the Emmy-nominated film A Mother's Rite. Wilson was a member of Ailey II and joined the company in 2018. Instagram: @christopher.r.wilson

AILEY MILESTONES

1958 – Alvin Ailey, who believed passionately that "dance belongs to everyone," and a group of young black dancers **perform for the first time** as members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at New York's 92nd Street Y.



1960 – **Alvin Ailey choreographs his classic masterpiece *Revelations***, which brings international acclaim. During the organization's first 10 years, Ailey created 20 new ballets; during his lifetime, he choreographed 79 ballets.

1962 – **AAADT is chosen to go on an extensive tour** to the Far East, Southeast Asia and Australia as part of President John F. Kennedy's progressive "President's Special International Program for Cultural Presentations."

1965 – **Judith Jamison joins Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater** and becomes widely recognized as an international dance star.

1967 – AAADT embarks on a three-month, 10-country **African Tour** for the State Department.

1968 – AAADT **performs for President Johnson** at the White House.

1969 – Alvin Ailey founds **The Ailey School**.



1970 – AAADT's **second State Department-sponsored tour of North Africa and Europe.** AAADT also tours the USSR–the first visit by an American modern dance company since the days of Isadora Duncan. *The Washington Post* reports that the company was kept onstage for 20 minutes of curtain calls after a sold-out opening night in Moscow

1971 – **Alvin Ailey choreographs *Cry* for Judith Jamison as a birthday present to his mother.** *Cry* becomes an instant hit, bringing even greater popularity to Mr. Ailey as a choreographer and Ms. Jamison as a dancer.

1974 – **Ailey II is founded** to develop young artists and new dance audiences.

CBS airs "**Ailey Celebrates Ellington,**" Alvin Ailey's dance tribute to the American jazz legend.

1977 – AAADT performs at the **inaugural gala for President Jimmy Carter** at the White House.

1982 – Alvin Ailey receives the **United Nations Peace Medal.**

1983 – AAADT celebrates its **25th anniversary** with a major benefit. *The New York Times* calls it "the biggest celebration of all" and further proclaims that "The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is not just a company, it is a school of thought."

1985 – AAADT is the first modern dance company to go on a US government-sponsored **tour of the People's Republic of China** since the normalization of Sino-American relations.



1988 – **Alvin Ailey receives The Kennedy Center Honors** for Lifetime Contributions to American Culture through the Performing Arts and New York's City's highest cultural honor: the Handel Medallion.

1989 – Upon Alvin Ailey's death and at his request, **Judith Jamison is named artistic director.** Under her leadership, the company flourishes, building an unparalleled reputation for performance, education, and innovation.

Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey is founded and **subsequently launches the company's national AileyCamp program.**

AILEY MILESTONES



1991 – **AileyCamp**, the final program spearheaded by Mr. Ailey, is **established in New York City**, providing youth ages 11–14 with activities that build self- esteem, encourage creative expression, and impart life skills such as goal-setting, self-discipline, and teamwork. It is **successfully replicated in 10 cities nationwide** and continues to inspire thousands of inner-city youth.

1994 – **AAADT performs at the televised inaugural gala for President Bill Clinton,** seen by 80 million viewers, and is featured on *The Phil Donahue Show*, reaching 18 million viewers.

Judith Jamison's autobiography, *Dancing Spirit,* edited by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, is published by Doubleday.

Ailey in the Park attracts 30,000 spectators, who congregate in New York City's Central Park to see the live performance.

1995 – Judith Jamison and the company are featured in a commercial broadcast on the Academy Awards and Super Bowl telecasts as part of a very successful American Express ad campaign. Advertising Age calls it "**the campaign of the decade**."

1996 – Jennifer Dunning's biography, *Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance,* is published by Addison Wesley.

1997 – Historic AAADT residency in **South Africa,** signaling the end to a long cultural boycott of the old apartheid regime by the world performing arts community.

1998 – The Ailey organization pioneers its new **BFA program, a joint venture between The Ailey School and Fordham University,** which offers students a unique opportunity to receive both superb dance training and a superior liberal arts education.



1999 – **Judith Jamison receives The Kennedy Center Honors** for Lifetime Contributions to American Culture through the Performing Arts.

Orlando Bagwell's **documentary, *"A Hymn for Alvin Ailey,"*** is broadcast nationally on PBS' Great Performances, inspired by Judith Jamison's work *Hymn*, her powerful tribute to Alvin Ailey, in collaboration with Tony nominee Anna Deavere Smith. Judith Jamison wins a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Choreography.

2002 – President George W. Bush awards **the 2001 National Medal of Arts to both Judith Jamison and the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation.** The Foundation is the first dance organization in history to be given this prestigious award and it is the first time ever that an arts organization and its artistic director have been recognized independently for this honor.

Judith Jamison carries the Olympic torch in Salt Lake City, UT prior to the opening of the **2002 Winter Olympics.** AAADT performs Jamison's *HERE...NOW,* commissioned for the Olympic Arts Festival.

2003 – **AAADT performs at the White House State Dinner** honoring President Mwai Kibaki of Kenya.



2004 – **The United States Postal Service issues a first-class postage stamp honoring Alvin Ailey** as part of the American Choreographers stamp series.

2005 – The Ailey organization celebrates the official **opening and public dedication of its new home, The Joan Weill Center for Dance,** New York's largest building dedicated to dance.

AAADT returns to Russia, becoming the only American company to perform in the Stars of the White Nights Festival and the first modern dance company presented at the legendary Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg.

The Ailey organization **launches Ailey Extension,** a new program that offers public classes in a variety of techniques.

AILEY MILESTONES

2006 – **The Library of Congress announces the donation of the Ailey archives to "the nation's library,"** which will preserve the materials, digitize them and make them more widely available to future generations. According to Librarian of Congress James H. Billington, it is "...a major achievement for the Library."



PBS Dance in America's *Beyond the Steps: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater*, which chronicles the 2005 tour to Russia, the Ailey organization's move into its new home, and the creation of the acclaimed ballet *Love Stories*, premieres.

2007 – AAADT is featured on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and the season opening of *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*.

2008 – The Ailey organization launches its **50th anniversary celebration** with 18 months of special performances, projects, and events, including: The Library of Congress in Washington, DC, opens the exhibit *Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater: 50 Years as Cultural Ambassador to the World;* AAADT performs on ABC's ***Dancing With the Stars*** and FOX's ***So You Think You Can Dance.*** AILEY creates special commemorative merchandise including a **Barbie® Doll, Hallmark greeting cards, a Movado Museum Timepiece, and a photographic art book *Ailey Ascending: A Portrait in Motion*** by renowned photographer Andrew Eccles. AILEY holds **free summer performances in all five boroughs** of New York City, including a street party on 55th street in front of New York City Center for an estimated 40,000 people; AAADT launches its five-week 50th anniversary season at New York City Center with a **Golden Anniversary Gala** with Honorary Chair Oprah Winfrey including special live performances with Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and Sweet Honey in the Rock; And the US Congress passes a resolution naming Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater a vital American **"Cultural Ambassador to the World."**

2009 – AAADT kicks off its **50th anniversary US tour** to 26 cities in Washington, DC, where President Obama and the First Family attend a performance at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

2010 – **Tracy Inman and Melanie Person become co-directors of The Ailey School,** succeeding the late Denise Jefferson, who led the School for about 25 years.



First Lady Michelle Obama honors Ms. Jamison at The White House Dance Series: *A Tribute to Judith Jamison,* celebrating her career as an American dancer, choreographer and artistic director of the company for the past 20 years.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg presents Judith Jamison with highest honor awarded by the City of New York: the Handel Medallion for distinguished achievement in the arts.

2011 – During Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's 2011 International tour **Judith Jamison passes the mantle of artistic director to Robert Battle on July 1, 2011.** He becomes only the third person in the company's history to hold that position.

AileyCamp launches in Newark.



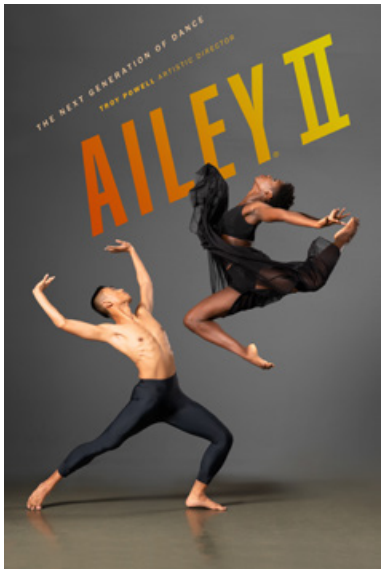
New York City Center designates Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater as the venue's **Principal Dance Company,** providing financial support for the creation of one new dance work for the company's performances during each of the following ten seasons.

The US Senate passes a resolution recognizing the artistic and cultural contributions of AAADT and the 50th anniversary of the first performance of Alvin Ailey's masterwork, *Revelations*, honoring this timeless classic "beloved by people around the world" with universal themes "that illustrate the strength and humanity within all of us."

AILEY MILESTONES

2012 – **The Ailey Legacy Residency launches.** The new lecture, technique, and repertory program for college-level students looks definitively into the history and creative heritage of Alvin Ailey, led by Sylvia Waters, who steps down as artistic director of Ailey II after 38 years.

The Ailey board appoints Bennett Rink as the new executive director of Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, succeeding Sharon Gersten Luckman, who planned to step down in January 2013 after over two decades with the organization.



2013 – An **historic engagement at Lincoln Center,** the first in 13 years, **launches the 2013-14 season led by Robert Battle,** which also includes visits to Brazil and Argentina and a record-breaking five-week engagement at New York City Center. Ailey II's first New York season also breaks box office records.

2014 – For the second consecutive year, **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater broke New York City Center season box office records**—nearly 70,000 audience members attend a total of 39 performances during the five-week engagement from December 4, 2013, to January 5, 2014.

Ailey II celebrated its 40th anniversary, performing for approximately 40,000 people in 33 cities worldwide, including five cities across France, Germany, Poland, and Luxembourg, and 28 cities in the United States and Canada.

President Obama awards the **Presidential Medal of Freedom**, the country's highest civilian honor, posthumously to Alvin Ailey in recognition of his contributions to civil rights and dance in America.



2015 – Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater makes an **historic return to South Africa** after nearly 20 years, performing in Johannesburg and Cape Town, and leading workshops, master classes, and lecture demonstrations in over two dozen schools, universities, and community centers.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater makes its national cinema debut as part of ***Lincoln Center at the Movies: Great American Dance.*** Shown on approximately 600 screens across the country, the film includes *Chroma* by Wayne McGregor, *Grace* by Ronald K. Brown, *Takademe* by Robert Battle, and Alvin Ailey's masterpiece *Revelations*, along with a rare look behind the scenes and exclusive interviews with the artists.

Simon & Schuster publishes ***MY STORY, MY DANCE: Robert Battle's Journey to Alvin Ailey***, an inspiring children's book based on Mr. Battle's life.

2016 – Judith Jamison's contributions to dance are celebrated at a White House Black History Month event hosted by First Lady Michelle Obama.

AileyCamp expands to ten cities nationwide, including Atlanta, GA; Baltimore, MD; Berkeley/Oakland, CA; Chicago, IL; Kansas City, KS; Kansas City, MO; Miami, FL; New York, NY; Newark, NJ; and Seattle/Tacoma, WA.



First Lady Michelle Obama recognizes AileyCamp Miami with the National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award for being one of the country's best after-school and out-of-school-time creative youth development programs using engagement in the arts and the humanities to increase academic achievement, graduation rates, and college enrollment.

Jamar Roberts is awarded a 2016 New York Dance and Performance "Bessie" Award for Sustained Achievement **"for impeccably representing the traditional values of classic modern dance while forging new paths with his sublime artistry, technical precision, and passionate presence with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater."**

AILEY MILESTONES

2017 – Ailey Arts In Education launches a **new curriculum initiative, *Night Creature: An Imaginative Journey Through Dance,*** a program for elementary-age youth in 3rd through 5th grades based on the study of Alvin Ailey's *Night Creature* using imaginative thinking to provide connections to music, visual arts, socials studies, science, and literacy.

Logo Trailblazer Honors recognizes Alvin Ailey as pioneer who bravely fought for equality. The tribute aired nationally on Logo and VH1.

Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation opens The Elaine Wynn & Family Education Wing, a 10,000-square-foot expansion of AILEY's permanent home, The Joan Weill Center for Dance. Designed by The Center's original architects, Iu + Bibliowicz Architects, The Elaine Wynn & Family Education Wing adds three floors to the west side of the building to provide four additional dance studios, two new flexible classrooms, and added administrative office space

AILEY's Artistic Director Emerita, Judith Jamison, is inducted in November 2017 into the Crain's Hall of Fame, which **honors business leaders who have transformed New York City** in their professional work and in their civic and philanthropic activities.



2018 – **Ailey II performs at the opening ceremony of the National Museum for Peace and Justice,** the nation's first comprehensive memorial dedicated to racial terror lynchings of African-Americans and the legacy of slavery and racial inequality in America, and the **Legacy Museum** in Montgomery, AL, in April.

Ailey Arts In Education & Community Programs launches **AileyDance for Active Aging, a residency program for adults ages 50 and older,** emphasizing the importance of strength training and mobility through movement while providing an outlet for artistic expression, creativity and building a greater sense of community.



BET and BLACK GIRLS ROCK! honor Judith Jamison with the Living Legend Award on national telecast which featured a special performance of *Cry* danced by Jacqueline Green.

Heinemann Publishers created a Guided Reading Book for 1st and 2nd grade students about the Ailey Athletic Boys Dance program, which are **distributed to schools nationwide beginning in the fall of 2018.**

The Ailey organization honors **Mr. Ailey's pioneering legacy with a 60th Anniversary celebration titled *Ailey Ascending***. The celebration consists of an international tour, a Choreography Unlocked festival of performance, and masterclasses, discussions and legacy panels at partner institutions throughout New York City, and a momentous New York City Center season of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, which features the company's first two-act ballet, *Lazarus*, created by the organization's inaugural artist-in-residence Rennie Harris.



2019 – **The Ailey Spirit Gala launches The Ailey School's 50th anniversary celebration.** To honor the milestone, **one hundred students from the School performed Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* in the 93rd Annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.**

Acclaimed company member **Jamar Roberts is named Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's first ever resident choreographer and premieres *Ode*,** a powerful and personal meditation on the beauty and fragility of life in a time of growing gun violence.



The company celebrates **Associate Artistic Director Masazumi Chaya's final New York City Center season with** a special performance program after nearly four decades with the company and took on a new role as director of the Alvin Ailey Choreographic Legacy Project. Mr. Chaya is honored with the prestigious ***2019 Dance Magazine Award,*** lauded by the magazine as "a diplomat and a direct connection to the Ailey legacy."

AILEY MILESTONES

2020 – In January, the company welcomes **Matthew Rushing into the role of associate artistic director,** after serving as rehearsal director and guest artist since 2010 and inspiring Ailey audiences since 1992 with performances that led him to be praised as one of the great male dancers on the American stage.



Since the launch of **Ailey All Access** in March 2020, AILEY has reached over **50 million people in 121 countries globally,** with the first-ever free streaming of full-length ballets from Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Ailey II repertory, along with classes, conversations, and original short films created by the Ailey dancers. Ailey All Access won *TimeOut New York*'s "Time In" Archive Treasure award for best archival streaming series and outlets like *Vogue* and *Dance Magazine* included works by Ailey artists on their "Best Of" lists for dance films created during the pandemic.

Ailey's first virtual season, *Ailey Forward*, reaches over 717,000 viewers, with eight unique programs from December 2–31. **Two dance films were created and premiered: *A Jam Session for Troubling Times*** by Resident Choreographer Jamar Roberts and ***Testament***, a collaboration between Associate Artistic Director Matthew Rushing, Clifton Brown, and Yusha-Marie Sorzano, in honor of the 60th anniversary of Ailey's classic *Revelations*.



2021–Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater marks **the 50th anniversary of Alvin Ailey's signature solo *Cry*,** with the streaming of a new video adaptation in May.

In January, director Jamila Wignot's **powerful *AILEY* documentary premieres at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival** heralded as a must-see and later in June a Tribeca Film

Festival critics pick. In early 2022, the national television broadcast premiere of the acclaimed documentary opens the 36th season of ***PBS American Masters.***

Internationally renowned performer, choreographer, director, and multidisciplinary artist **Francesca Harper is appointed Ailey II artistic director.** Ms. Harper's personal connections with Ailey are deeply rooted, as she received training at The Ailey School while her mother, the late Denise Jefferson directed the program from 1984–2010.



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater participates in Lincoln Center's premiered **BAAND Together Dance Festival** August 17–21, a celebration of dance, that for the first time joined together New York City's iconic dance companies **B**allet Hispánico, **A**lvin Ailey American Dance Theater, **A**merican Ballet Theatre, **N**ew York City Ballet, and Dance Theatre of Harlem, which has become an annual tradition.

September marked the launch of **"Champion Tears,"** a dynamic clothing collaboration between Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, artist and creative director of Denim Tears, Tremaine Emory, and the iconic Global sportswear brand, Champion.

2022 – For the first time, the Ailey organization presents ***Ailey Moves NYC!,*** a summer celebration of free outdoor performances, dance classes, and documentary screenings throughout all five boroughs, July 23–August 1, 2022. Featuring Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ailey II, Ailey Extension, and Ailey Arts In Education programs, the festival delivered dance back to people of all ages across New York City, the cultural capital of the world.

AILEY MILESTONES

2023– **Matthew Rushing** is named **interim artistic director,** leading the company forward during its 65th anniversary season.

At the invitation of First Lady Jill Biden, members of **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater** visited The White House to perform an excerpt from Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* at the National Governors Association meeting.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater returns to **Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM)** for the first time since 2010 for its one-week Spring Season, with the return of Ronald K. Brown's ***Dancing Spirit***, a tribute to living legend Judith Jamison in her 80th year.

The UK Critics' Circle recognized Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater with four nominations in the **2023 National Dance Awards**. The company won **Outstanding Company**, and Kyle Abraham's *Are You in Your Feelings?* won **Best Modern Choreography**. Yannick Lebrun was nominated for Best Male Modern Performance for Ronald K. Brown's *Dancing Spirit*, and Constance Stamatiou was nominated for Best Female Modern Performance for Alvin Ailey's *Cry*.

Disney's 2023 *The Little Mermaid* employed Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater members to serve as the movement inspiration for 3D animation in the dynamic "Under the Sea" musical number.

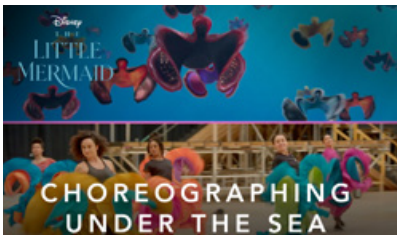
Ailey II celebrated its **50th Anniversary**. Commemorating Ailey II's highly anticipated return to the UK for the first time in over a decade, the Company was photographed in Canterbury Cathedral performing a preview of Ailey's *Revelations*. The photos were selected among the UK's top outlets for "best photo of the day".

The Ailey/Fordham BFA in Dance program celebrated its **25th anniversary**. Longtime faculty of The Ailey School, **Ana Marie Forsythe**, receives **Dance Teacher's 2024 Awardee of Distinction**, recognized for continuing Lester Horton's legacy and preserving the Horton technique for over five decades.

Ailey Extension collaborated with **Noggin** to create and launch ***Dance Squad with Ailey,*** a series of six on-demand dance videos featuring Ailey instructor Keith Alexander, encouraging the development of creative expression through dance.

AileyCamp Atlanta launches its inaugural partnership with Purpose Built Schools, aligning with Mayor Dickens' *Atlanta Year of the Youth* initiative.





Click photo above to watch behind the scenes video

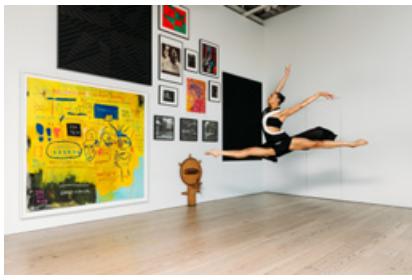
50 YEARS OF
AILEY II



Click photo above to watch behind the scenes video

AILEY MILESTONES

2024– **The Whitney Museum of American Art** opens ***Edges of Ailey*** on September 25, 2024, the first large-scale museum exhibition to celebrate the life, creativity, influence, and enduring legacy of Alvin Ailey. Through a multimedia display on the museum's fifth floor, paintings, drawings, sculpture, photography, film, rehearsal footage, and archival materials situate Mr. Ailey within a broad social, creative, and cultural context. Through February 5, 2025, *Edges of Ailey* brings together art, history, live performance, music, and new commissions by choreographers influenced by Mr. Ailey to capture the full range of his passions, curiosities, obsessions, and creative output.



Click photo above to watch behind the scenes video

Portrait of Ailey, an eight-part docuseries conceived of and directed by Ailey II Artistic Director Emerita Sylvia Waters, launches in February. Available for free on *PBS Learning Media, Portrait of Ailey* tells the compelling story of the life, work, and legacy of Alvin Ailey through rare historical film and still images.

Executive Director **Bennett Rink** is highlighted in *Politics NY* for being honored in the City & State inaugural "**Arts & Culture Power 100**," highlighting leaders in New York.



AILEY partners with **Google Arts & Culture** to share the life and legacy of Alvin Ailey with a larger online audience.

AileyDance for Active Aging receives a resolution from the Newark Municipal Council commending the program for its positive health and wellness benefits to the senior community in Newark, New Jersey.

2025– **Alicia Graf Mack is named AILEY's fourth artistic director** on July 1, 2025 and featured in *EBONY Magazine*'s 2025 Power 100 List.

Sylvia Waters receives the **2025 Dance Teacher Award.**

WHAT CRITICS ARE SAYING ABOUT AILEY

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

"**A gorgeous display of artistry and technical mastery that evokes the beauty of diversity in American history**… the largest modern dance company in the United States and **a magnificent example of multiracial artistry and continuous innovation**. The show is inspiring… a wonder to see at any time."

San Francisco Classical Voice, Shiriel King Abramson – April 14, 2026

"**Ailey still soars**…Alvin Ailey was one of those rare artists whose spirit feels undying, eternally passing from one generation to another. But this continuation can never be taken for granted."

San Francisco Chronicle, Rachel Howard – April 8, 2026

"**One of the country's most popular dance companies**…"

The Philadelphia Inquirer, Ellen Dunkel – February 26, 2026

"…has programmed an **ambitious array of new repertory** for its current season…**strongly performed.**"

The Wall Street Journal, Robert Greskovic – December 30, 2025

"Every year, I am privileged to write a review about one of New York's most beloved dance companies. **Every year is different, unique, some new choreographers, some new dancers, some new works, but the quality of Alvin Ailey's dance is evergreen**… it has continuously invigorated the language of dance with fresh stories, dancers, costumes, and music classics, as well as contemporary soundscapes. That is to say, along with seasoned creators and a new cache of artists, they complement each other, creating **a program of joy felt right down to the core of one's spirit.**"

Medium, Isa Freeling – December 29, 2025

"…showcased a **dynamic range of work,** including two world premieres that highlighted both **innovation and legacy**."

Broadway World, Elizabeth Blosfield – December 17, 2025

"…the **always-strong, always-powerful** troupe of dancers…**mixing the classic with the contemporary.**"

Hollywood Soapbox, John Soltes – December 10, 2025

"My **all-time favorite** dance company"

New York Daily News, Karu F. Daniels – June 5, 2025

"**One of New York's great holiday dance traditions is the seasonal showcase of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater**, a banquet of classic and new works by several generations of acclaimed choreographers…"

The New York Times, Brian Schaefer – December 27, 2024

"**Sensational dancing**… He wanted his dancers to be able to tackle anything, and they do, sensationally."

Bachtrack, Carla Escoda – December 9, 2024 (about Alvin Ailey)

"**Five Stars: extraordinary soul-stirring dance**"

The Guardian, Lyndsey Winship – August 24, 2023

"**It was phenomenal, the dancers, everybody, the performances. It was electrifying**. This was one of the bucket list moments of my life… **please go celebrate and see the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Phenomenal**. Phenomenal."

Tamron Hall Show, Tamron Hall – December 1, 2022

"How Alvin Ailey Opened the Eyes of a 12-Year-Old Zadie Smith… Uplift!… and it was a ravishment. **Nothing prepares you for the totality of Alvin Ailey: the aural, visual, physical, spiritual beauty… Heaven… Everywhere you looked: sensory pleasure… And each spring, now that I live in New York, I don't have to go very far at all to get another shot of Ailey's soaring delights**."

The New York Times, Zadie Smith – April 8, 2019

"**More so than any other major dance company**, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater **carries an aura of social, moral and even spiritual righteousness**. It's **not just the dancers' exquisite athleticism and peerless commitment that convey this and transfer such a rush to the audience**. It's also the **artistic content, especially when it directly engages with human virtues**."

The Washington Post, Sarah L. Kaufman – February 7, 2018

"**It became a place where artists of all races had a home. All that mattered was talent… And through him, African-American history was told in a way that it had never been told before -- with passionate, virtuoso dance performances that transfixed audiences worldwide.** Alvin said that 'Dance came from the people and that it should always be delivered back to the people.' **Alvin Ailey delivered**, both through his life and through the dance company that will forever bear his name."

President Barack Obama at the Presidential Medal of Freedom Ceremony – November 24, 2014

WHAT CRITICS ARE SAYING ABOUT AILEY

Alicia Graf Mack

"**Alicia Graf Mack is steering one of America's greatest cultural institutions with vision, reverence, and a powerful eye toward the future.** Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater isn't simply preserving a legacy — it's expanding one. And that is **absolutely worth witnessing in person**. For tickets and tour dates, visit ailey.org."

RollingOut, Melinda Johnson – February 25, 2026

"...after **an acclaimed career as a dancer and status-quo-disrupting educator**, Graf Mack, 46, is the newest artistic director of Ailey — the fourth in its nearly 68-year history..."

The Washington Post, Celia Wren – January 30, 2026

"It's **a new and exciting chapter** for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater... **raising the curtain on AILEY's next era under the leadership of Artistic Director Alicia Graf Mack, renowned dancer and educator.**"

People, Angela Andaloro – December 11, 2025

"Last week, **for only the fourth time in its nearly 70-year history**, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company **began its new season under the leadership of a different Artistic Director: Alicia Graf Mack.** Her roots with the Ailey organization run deep. In a short-term business world that tends to be focused only on the now, **this appointment represents a rarer kind of thinking: It embraces continuity, and long-term thinking, as the best short-term strategy**."

Inc., Mark Miller – December 11, 2025

"The company is full of hope. **Alicia Graf Mack**, **one of its brightest and most beloved stars of the two-thousands**, takes over as the company's artistic director next year."

The New Yorker, Brian Seibert – December 25, 2024

"When the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre sails into City Center for its **annual celebration of dance that lifts the spirits, stirs the soul and reminds us that life is beautiful,** there is a new artistic director at the helm, Alicia Graf Mack."

New York Amsterdam News, Zita Allen – December 4, 2025

The Repertory

Program A:

Night Creature by Alvin Ailey

"**It felt like a gala**... was **a knockout all around**. With its glittery, ice-blue costumes... and sultry moves, **it was like sitting by a fire during a snowstorm**."

Fjord Review, Faye Arthurs – December 16, 2022

"...is an old friend, it always takes me by surprise when it introduces Cuban hip motion — a joy, since the Ailey dancers **are masters in the powerfully lateral use of the pelvis, now moving in figures-of-eight, now in snakier undulations...** As you'd hope, **the Ailey dancers look wholly at home in every part**."

The New York Times, Alastair Macaulay – December 13, 2018

"One of Mr. Ailey's happiest works. **It has a joyful pulse, a sophisticated entente** with its sophisticated music that carries on the best of the Ellington tradition."

The New York Times

"...**delectably sassy**..."

The New York Times

"This remains **one of Ailey's best curtain raisers**, and the company throw themselves into its elf-like spirit with only rhythmic measure containing their dance abandon."

The New York Post

WHAT CRITICS ARE SAYING ABOUT AILEY

A Song For You (Excerpt from *Love Songs*) by Alvin Ailey

"This lyrical solo is **a gateway to emotion and hope. Beautiful and profound**."
Danza Hoy, Maritza Gueler – February 8, 2026

"…**exciting solo dance piece**."
The Huffington Post, Isa Freeling

Cry by Alvin Ailey

"'Cry' has now been given to **a new generation, with new passion to explore and new treasures to be found**."
Hollywood Soapbox, John Soltes – December 18, 2022

"…the **showstopping solo celebrating Black women**, 'Cry.'"
San Francisco Chronicle, Rachel Howard – March 28, 2022

"'Cry,' a **solo originally created for the formidable Judith Jamison in 1971, in which Ailey powerfully portrays the struggles, the dignity, and the strength of African American women**."'
The New Yorker, Marina Harss – December 20, 2021

"Perennial Ailey favorites *Revelations* and *Cry* feel especially relevant right now: the former an ecstatic, timeless expression of hope, **the latter Ailey's iconic tribute to the historic strength of black women**."
New York Magazine – December 12, 2016

"In three sections, *Cry* **explores physical hardship, emotional** suffering and — to the Voices of East Harlem's "Right On Be Free" — **boundless joy**. Structurally, it **builds to an emphatic release**…"
The New York Times, Gia Kourlas – December 10, 2015

Grace by Ronald K. Brown

"… a **powerful and uplifting** work that brought together **themes of love, spirituality, and emotion. As a standout piece in the company's repertoire**, *Grace* was a fitting conclusion to unify the evening's exploration of human connection and transcendence."
Broadway World, Elizabeth Blosfield – December 17, 2025

"…when *Grace* debuted in 1999, it was **the rare work that brought something new out of them while staying true to the spiritual core that makes the Ailey company distinct**."
The New York Times, Brian Seibert – December 12, 2025

"…**one of the best dances that Alvin Ailey has in its arsenal. This epic masterpiece**… by Ronald K. Brown…**offers a stunning, holistic portrait of a "journey to the promised land."**
Hollywood Soapbox, John Soltes – December 10, 2025

"**Grace finds the spirit on the dance floor.**"
Medium, Garth Grimball – April 15, 2025

"*Grace*, the luminous masterpiece that Ronald K. Brown made for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre in 1999, **ranks as one of the greatest and most enduringly spirit-lifting dance works of the past twenty-five years.** The Ailey company revived it beautifully…"
The New Yorker, Brian Seibert – January 13, 2025

"**Brown has a masterful way of digging into spirituality, of giving it a hypnotic groove. The stage can seem buoyant, as if celestial bodies are dancing on clouds.**"
The New York Times, Gia Kourlas – December 2, 2024

"The work is about the journey to the promised land and the grace that is all around us. Brown's mix of Modern dance and West African idioms is like home for the performers, and the joyous music… **we know we are in for a spiritual experience**."
The Observer, Caedra Scott-Flaherty, December 23, 2024

Program B:

Blink of an Eye by Medhi Walerski

"Walerski is responding to Bach violin partitas and sonatas, with their ingenious way of flickering through the whole spectrum of human emotion, and he keeps his selections brisk… It all **shows off the dancers' dynamic prowess most entrancingly**."
San Francisco Chronicle, Rachel Howard – April 8, 2026

WHAT CRITICS ARE SAYING ABOUT AILEY

"… a sleek contemporary piece that **allowed the dancers to show off their technical range**. There were **many virtuoso moments** that earned applause from the audience."

Bachtrack, Rebecca Ehrhardt – February 16, 2026

"Walerski moves fluently between distilled gestures and complex choreographic world's remaining precise in every choice. **The dancers' elevation, soundless landings, sharp turns and evident pleasure heighten the work's impact.**"

Dance Europe, Joanna Priwieziencew – February/March 2026 Issue

"**an etheric piece of paradise, masterfully channeled into dance, fully realized and exquisitely executed.** Walerski reflects the very nature of Bach's 'Partitas for Solo Violin', evoking the earthly life shifting into the divine."

Medium, Isa Freeling – December 29, 2025

"This work is described as featuring 'movement that flows like sound,' and the piece lived up to this description as dancers alternated fluid phrases and partner work with moments of stillness. The choreography underscored how quickly moments can shift or disappear. As the stage transformed for each subsequent work, **the audience was reminded of the transient beauty of live performance and life itself, making *Blink of an Eye* a fitting and evocative opening**."

Broadway World, Elizabeth Blosfield – December 17, 2025

"**an explosive display of precision** originally choreographed for Nederlands Dans Theater."

New York Amsterdam News, Zita Allen – December 4, 2025

A Case of You by Judith Jamison

"… **seesawing emotional intensity.** The dance was further elevated by the intuitive crowd's responses. **An appreciative murmur rippled through the house** when Green ran and jumped at Lebrun's torso, clamping herself to him through sheer leg strength (he remained impassive). Later, when she flew and landed in a standing position on his thighs **there was a collective gasp.**"

Fjord, Faye Arthurs – December 18, 2025

"…the duet centers on emotional intimacy and connection. The dancers offered **palpable chemistry, capturing the push and pull of a relationship driven by passion**. Particularly striking were moments of stillness…"

Broadway World, Elizabeth Blosfield – December 17, 2025

"The 7-minute work **exudes passion and pathos, sensuality and somberness**, all set to the music of Joni Mitchell, performed by Diana Krall."

Hollywood Soapbox, John Soltes – December 10, 2025

"… **startling, inventive and eclectically intimate**…"

The Miami Herald, Jordan Levin – February 19, 2016

Many Angels by Lar Lubovitch

"**This diverse vision of utopia was something far more moving than he perhaps intended.** But Lubovitch is right: dance need not address personal, historical, or current events and traumas. However, it can, and I am grateful to all the choreographers, dancers, and curators who effectively tapped that power in 2024. That's one trend I hope will stick around."

Fjord, Faye Arthurs – January 3, 2025

"The curtain rises on a backdrop of clouds shot through with heavenly light (designed by Lubovitch), which elicited actual 'oohs' and 'ahhs' from the audience… **Everything is lovely—the music, the movement, the shapes**…"

The Observer, Caedra Scott-Flaherty, December 23, 2024

"Lubovitch's considerable storytelling and choreographic prowess produced a poetic abstract narrative work**. The ethereal yet simple and concise interpretation placed the performers and the audience beyond the clouds where we all danced vicariously high above humankind.**"

Out & About, Walter Rutledge – December 22, 2024

"*Many Angels* **is a seamless dance played out in the spaces between air and clouds** choreographed by Lar Lubovitch. With exquisite music by Gustav Mahler, it is **a tightly woven piece as light and compelling as the clouds' ever-changing forms…** The piece defines itself with angels dancing amongst the clouds until the angels become the clouds threading through the sky in symbiotic harmony."

Medium, Isa Freeling – December 26, 2024

WHAT CRITICS ARE SAYING ABOUT AILEY

Song of the Anchorite by Jamar Roberts

"had the virtue of connecting us to the company's history, inspired by a mostly lost Alvin Ailey solo, *Hermit Songs*...**It read, often touchingly, as an allegory for the artist committing himself to a lonely, sacrificial vocation.**"

San Francisco Chronicle, Rachel Howard – April 8, 2026

"Set to a thoughtfully austere arrangement of Ravel's Adagio by jazz trumpeter Avishai Cohen, **Roberts brings a contemporary sensibility while remaining faithful to the work's core: single-minded spiritual devotion**... Roberts is **a choreographer who resists resolution and continues to seek, reaching truth through humility**."

Dance Europe, Joanna Priwieziencew – February/ March 2026 Issue

"**A world premiere worth the wait**... without question, one of the most anticipated moments of the evening — and it **did not disappoint. Roberts, one of contemporary dance's most thoughtful voices**..."

RollingOut, Melinda Johnson – February 25, 2026

"It presents a single male dancer in **largely gestural, yearning sequences** and was **expressively performed**..."

The Wall Street Journal, Robert Greskovic – December 30, 2025

"I've always been a great admirer of Jamar Roberts. His reawakening of the 1961 solo *Hermit Songs*, based on Samuel Barber's *Song of the Anchorite*, was **languid and stunning**; danced to Avishai Cohen's interpretation of a Ravel adagio. **Quietly radiant, it held an understated sensuality and spiritual elegance**."

Medium, Isa Freeling – December 29, 2025

"Roberts' 2025 interpretation **examined themes of passion and devotion, exploring their physical and spiritual manifestations.** With grounded, powerful movement, the piece felt **introspective and emotionally resonant**."

Broadway World, Elizabeth Blosfield - December 17, 2025

"*Song of the Anchorite*, by Jamar Roberts...**successful in its more modest aims**. A homage to *Hermit Songs*, a solo about a medieval monk that Ailey made for himself in 1961, it is **eight minutes of quiet penitence**"

The New York Times, Brian Seibert – December 12, 2025

Finale of All Programs:

Revelations by Alvin Ailey

"**Excellence is a given** when you're watching... Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's *Revelations*."

The Boston Globe, Jeffrey Gantz – December 18, 2025

"...*Revelations*...It is **both a mission statement and the greatest crowd-pleaser**."

Medium, Garth Grimball – April 15, 2025

"The way that Ailey moved so convincingly, and effortlessly, in *Revelations* from the heavy and reverential "I Been Buked" opening to the celebratory "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham" finale **always amazes me**."

Fjord, Faye Arthurs – January 3, 2025

"I always say that **the Christmas season does not begin until I see the Ailey troupe and their signature closing performance *Revelations*.**"

New York Amsterdam News, Christina Greer, Ph.D. – December 11, 2025

"One hasn't experienced classical, modern or contemporary dance without experiencing Ailey's singular vision for the African American historical experience. ***Revelations* is always a welcome capstone to a thrilling night of choreographic command.**"

Hollywood Soapbox, John Soltes – December 10, 2025

"a **riveting performance of Ailey's signature *Revelations***, which brought the crowd to their feet for a long-lasting standing ovation."

VOGUE, Kiana Murden – November 30, 2023

"Ailey's **legendary *Revelations*, still hugely powerful after 65 years**, alongside the modern pieces of precision and fire."

The Guardian, Lyndsey Winship – August 24, 2023

"... **one of the most celebrated and enduring works of American dance**."

The New York Times, Brian Schaefer – December 2, 2022

WHAT CRITICS ARE SAYING ABOUT AILEY

"**The centrality of *Revelations* in the repertory of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is like nothing else in dance… It's the blueprint for most other works the company dances** and the standard against which they're all judged. It's **the perennial billboard for the company's brand and its bible, too**… the **spiritual sustenance this company provides**, and not just in *Revelations*."

The New York Times, Brian Seibert – December 18, 2020

"*Revelations* captures the urgency and the yearning expressed in spirituals such as 'Fix Me Jesus' and 'I Wanna Be Ready'. **Like all great art, it never gets old. In fact, in recent years, with civil rights at the forefront of our national conscience, its power has only grown**."

The New Yorker, Marina Harss – December 7, 2020

"**Still, We Dance: Why Alvin Ailey's Revelations is More Vital Than Ever**…Against the backdrop of both a global pandemic that disproportionately ravages communities of color and the urgency of social justice movements including Black Lives Matter, **Ailey's valentine to the spirituals of his youth is its own call to action, an ode to the deliverance of self-expression in the face of adversity**… That sense of history's long arc is not just an element of *Revelations*, **it is woven into the fabric of a company born out of the civil rights movement to offer hope, strength, and the balm of beauty**."

Town & Country, Kibwe Chase-Marshall – September 2020 issue

"**nothing will ever take the place of *Revelations*, which more than a signature work is the very core of the company's identity**…"

The Associated Press, Jocelyn Noveck – December 20, 2018

"**evergreen masterpiece that never seems to age**."

The Boston Globe, Karen Campbell – March 24, 2018

"**guarantees a standing ovation**, as its gospel score and images of strength and fellowship build to a roar that engulfs you and lifts you, **no matter how many times you've seen it**."

The Washington Post, Sarah L. Kaufman – February 7, 2018

"**I think that every American owes it to him and herself to see the Alvin Ailey troupe perform *Revelations*. It is an American phenomenon.** You know, it's like Norman Rockwell – and then there's Alvin Ailey. **I've probably seen it countless times and every time it's magical, spiritual and hopeful – everything that we want ourselves to be and hope that our country will be**. So, it was an extraordinary evening to be able to see that."

Oprah Winfrey on attending Ailey's 50th Anniversary Gala, *Entertainment Tonight* – December 3, 2008

The Dancers

"…**many brilliant dancers**…"

Medium, Isa Freeling – December 26, 2024

"**its sterling group of dancers remains primed for whatever will be asked of it**."

The Wall Street Journal, Robert Greskovic – December 26, 2023

"**It's almost impossible not to love the dancers** at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, such is their stage presence, their infectious joy in dancing, and their total commitment to their art."

Ballet 2000, Gerald Dowler – November 2023

"Yet **the glorious virtuosity of the dancing means that each evening never disappoints**. The dancers seem to have a unique ability to move forwards and backwards at the same time, movement flowing through their bodies with astonishing grace."

The Guardian, Sarah Crompton – September 17, 2023

"**Ailey artists are known** throughout the industry **for their tremendous physical shape and ability**."

The Washington Post, Sarah L. Kaufman – February 3, 2022

"**Stamatiou is an outstanding dancer and presence on stage**, though equally matched in both dance quality and charisma, by Yannick Lebrun. **It's unlikely that anyone could consistently divert their eyes away from Lebrun for more than a swift second, his mellifluous movement style combined with his magnetism:** a recipe for instant and lasting appeal."

Bachtrack, Deborah Weiss – September 8, 2023

WHAT CRITICS ARE SAYING ABOUT AILEY

"... **Harris has emerged as a quietly confident, eminently capable star** among the company's current roster, **a dancer of transfixing technical ability and ever-deepening expressive range. She is as grounded as she is electrifying**..."

The New York Times, Siobhan Burke – December 9, 2022 (Jacquelin Harris profile)

"Selling flowers at the marketplace, Bashiba falls for a traveling man, Claude Jean-Louis, played by Solomon Dumas. Who wouldn't? **Dumas, with his understated yet rapturous dancing, fills the space like a rippling wave.**"

The New York Times, Gia Kourlas – December 7, 2025 (About Maija García's *Jazz Island*)

"To single out but two memorable performances from the 'Classics' bill I caught, **Christopher R. Wilson made swallow-sleek work of his excerpt from *Love Songs*** (1972, to a Donny Hathaway recording of a song by Leon Russell)."

The Wall Street Journal, Robert Greskovic – December 30, 2025

"**Christopher Taylor**, threw himself joyfully into the processional to 'Wade in the Water,' 'Sinner Man,' and 'Rocka My Soul.' He **seemed to be truly living. The company is in particularly fine form** these days."

Fjord Review, Marina Harss – December 3, 2022 (about Ailey's *Revelations*)

"**'Sinnerman' remains the masterpiece within a masterpiece. Christopher Taylor, James Gilmer, Patrick Coker never lose energy while executing a masterclass in Ailey technique**."

Broadway World, Lora Strum – December 20, 2024

"In 'Fix Me Jesus,' **Miranda Quinn and James Gilmer conveyed the work's intention with striking clarity.** Quinn did more than avoid Gilmer's gaze; She created a charged distance between them. **The space separating them felt inhabited by a spirit, faith – it was never just the two of them.**"

Dance Europe, Joanna Priwieziencew – February/ March 2026 Issue (About Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*)

"**Ailey's New Secret Weapon: The Heroically Unmannered James Gilmer...it was clear from the start that he was a standout**... A strong partner who, at 6 feet 2, **fills the stage with a special kind of grandeur**, Gilmer is almost **heroically unmannered — his dancing has an ease, a looseness** that can be rare in ballet dancers."

The New York Times, Gia Kourlas – December 13, 2021

"**Ashley Kaylynn Green — a dancer of absorbing, unaffected ebullience no matter the role**... springs up and down from the floor with so little concern for gravity that she seems more spirit than person."

The New York Times, Gia Kourlas – December 11, 2023

"The same night, **Xavier Mack delivered a cathartic final prayer** in 'I Wanna Be Ready.' **With unwavering balance and a strong core, he reached beyond each extension, probing space as if anticipated Judgement Day.**"

Dance Europe, Joanna Priwieziencew – February/ March 2026 Issue (About Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*)

"... **Day's powerful entrance stunned. You couldn't keep our eyes off his dynamic presence.**"

MD Theatre Guide, Carolyn Keleman – February 2, 2026 (About Isaiah Day in Jamar Roberts' *Song of the Anchorite*)

"**Isaiah Day**, an **eye-catching newcomer**..."

The Wall Street Journal, Robert Greskovic – December 26, 2023

"**Leonardo Brito devoured the space**, embracing both the enormity of Bach's music and its intimacy... **a work that unfolds in the blink of an eye but lingers endlessly.**"

Dance Europe, Joanna Priwieziencew – February/ March 2026 Issue (About Medhi Walerski's *Blink of an Eye*)

BROADCAST HIGHLIGHTS 2025-26 SEASON

PBS News Hour: Alicia Graf Mack Reflects on leading the legendary AILEY company



CBS News: Alicia Graf Mack Joins AILEY as Artistic Director



The View: Honoring Iconic Alvin Ailey Dancer and Choreographer Judith Jamison



ABC7 Chicago: Alvin Ailey dancers help expose Chicago students to the arts



CNN: New Leader of AILEY Shares Vision for Iconic Institution



ABC7: AILEY's new artistic director calls role a full-circle moment



The Kelly Clarkson Show: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in "Grace"



NYC Tourism: "The Freedom to Be" ft. Ailey's Yannick Lebrun & Caroline Dartey



Tamron Hall Show: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs *Revelations*



The Jennifer Hudson Show: Alvin Ailey Dancers Deliver a Breathtaking Performance



NBC News Now: Legacy of Alvin Ailey Lives on at his New York Dance Theater



***TED Talk:* "*Revelations* from a Lifetime in Dance"** with Judith Jamison and excerpts of Ailey's classic works *Cry* and *Revelations*



Click on thumbnail images for full videos.

***WQXR:* "Dancing On-Air: Blink of an Eye" – April 6, 2026**

*This article has been translated from Dutch to English.

DeMorgen.

Behind the scenes at the world's largest modern dance company: 'Even if the ground shifts beneath your feet, you can stay upright'

By: Paul Notelteirs
June 25, 2026



For the first time in 25 years, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is performing in Belgium this fall. The world's largest modern dance company broke through with technically virtuosic works about the African American experience and remains relevant today. 'There is something universal in our stories.'

“Dance is for everyone. I believe it came from the people and that we must give it back to them.” The motto of American choreographer Alvin Ailey could have been a woolly platitude, but nearly forty years after his death, a packed house at the Brooklyn Academy of Music proves the opposite once again. While the performing arts in New York are still often a hobby of the predominantly white middle class due to high ticket prices, the audience for the performance by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is remarkably diverse.

The first piece on the program, a tribute to Ailey in which the choreography follows the rhythm of audio interviews with his collaborators, leaves many in the theater gasping for breath. To them, the man is not just a choreographer, but a pioneer who broadened and deepened modern dance.

“I once was lost, but now I'm found / And now my soul is heaven bound,” it goes later in *Revelations*, the masterpiece by the company with which the choreographer definitively put himself on the map in 1960.

The dance is imbued with an exuberant optimism that moves and inspires, even though Ailey, as a Black gay man, had plenty of reasons to become discouraged during his life.

He grew up in Texas in the 1930s, when the Great Depression led to unprecedented poverty and members of the Ku Klux Klan had little trouble hiding their beliefs. Dance was an outlet and a way to escape the pain of reality. Only much later would it become apparent that he could also use art to change that reality.



A few performances at a small cultural center in New York in 1958 sowed the seeds of what would grow into the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. The choreographer wanted to bring African American culture to the stage in all its complexity. To the sounds of spirituals, gospel, and blues, he had Black dancers explore both loneliness and resilience.

For those who need a point of reference to gauge how revolutionary such a celebration of the lives of Black Americans was: the New York City Ballet did not hire a Black dancer for the first time until 1958. “We have come this far, and we still have a long way to go,” says a woman at the Brooklyn Academy of Music as she pulls a handkerchief from her bag after the performance. *Revelations*, which depicts perseverance on the path from slavery to freedom, made a deep impression on her.

Ailey's blueprint

Once, Alvin Ailey was the only one who believed in his dream; today, his dance company is world-famous and extremely successful. More than 25 million people have seen one of his performances in 71 countries.

It remains a non-profit organization, but one that is particularly well-oiled. To establish its own building in the heart of Manhattan, the group effortlessly raised 69 million euros twenty years ago. This makes the Joan Weill Center for Dance the largest center in New York entirely dedicated to dance.

Within the modern dance world, no one can ignore Alvin Ailey anymore, which is both a blessing and a challenge. For how can a company with such a long tradition continue to reinvent itself without betraying its initial principles?



It is one of the questions Alicia Graf Mack is pondering. She is in her first season as artistic director of the company when she takes a seat at a table in the Joan Weill Center to discuss her plans. National Dance Awards and a Presidential Medal of Freedom, presented by Barack Obama, hang on the wall, but Graf Mack is not intimidated by the success of her predecessors.

“I can follow the blueprint that Ailey himself laid,” she says. Unlike many other choreographers of his time, he did not view his company solely as a platform to showcase his own work. Other makers were brought on board to create their own productions, which certainly opened doors for Black choreographers that remained closed elsewhere. “I still believe that we become richer when we let more voices be heard. That is why, for new work, I look for makers with a very unique and recognizable visual language that is different from what we have already seen.”

Healing the soul

The dance company does not isolate itself from the outside world, although a common thread is noticeable even among the new works being programmed. “It is always about technical virtuosity,” says Yannick Lebrun, who has been dancing with the group for eighteen years. Choreographers expect dancers to be able to effortlessly switch between ballet and jazz, or between modern dance and the Horton technique.

Furthermore, the African American experience continues to recur as a theme. As a migrant from French Guiana, Lebrun notices how much it means to people of color to see shared stories on stage. “*Revelations*, for example, is truly medicine: it heals the soul and gives people hope that a better future is possible.”

“The piece 'Revelations' is truly medicine: it heals the soul and gives people hope that a better future is possible.” - Yannick Lebrun (Dancer)

Ailey’s words that dance is of and for the people also echo in Count Mack’s mind as she has to decide which new works to commission. “During his lifetime, dance was an elitist art form in which European fairy tales were often told. Due to segregation, Black people were not even allowed into the theaters for a long time. He wanted exactly that: everyone could walk into the hall and recognize themselves, their family, and their traditions,” she says.



Modern dance sometimes has a reputation for being hermetic, but the performances of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater are readable yet layered. During the performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, *Hymn* focuses for forty-five minutes on the impact of Ailey himself, without feeling self-absorbed. By dancing to old interviews about his life, a fascinating dialogue with the present emerges. From dreams that became reality to missed opportunities: a balance is struck that moves you.

Universal experiences

If the dance company excels at anything, it is extracting art from an individual and specific experience that resonates widely. In *Hymn*, for example, alongside the indictment of the pigeonholing of the white dance world, there is also a compelling quest by someone who is lonely and seeking connection. This also makes the performances particularly suitable export products; many works travel the world after their American premiere.

For Graf Mack, who danced with the company herself for years before taking up her directorship, that universal recognizability remains particularly difficult to capture. She recalls how more photos were taken of her and her fellow dancers on the Great Wall than of the stone defensive line, simply because the local population was not accustomed to seeing so many Black people together. But during the evening performance, the audience proved to be fully on board with the story they wanted to tell.

“There is something universal in our experiences. We have all experienced pain, joy, and resilience. I think you feel that at a cellular level all over the world,” says Graf Mack. When she first joined an international tour and performed in Russia, she herself became emotional when she noticed how broadly their work touched others. “Tears rolled down my cheeks because I got to represent the beauty, pride, and history of all Black people. That was so meaningful to me.”

Political unrest

Almost seventy years after the dance company's founding, the world naturally looks fundamentally different. Whereas in the 1950s it was already an act of resistance if Black artists stepped onto a stage at all, in the era of Black Lives Matter, major steps towards inclusion have been taken.



This raises the question of whether that also weighs on the impact of old performances still in the repertoire and whether it is not time for more explicit resistance. The company, for example, has rarely spoken out regarding policy decisions or concrete political movements. When Donald Trump took charge of the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater did cancel its performances there. However, a statement at the time referred to business considerations, not to the figure of Trump himself.

“It is no longer surprising to see Black bodies on the scene, but it is still effective.” - Count Mack (Artistic Director)

Graf Mack is diplomatic enough not to make political enemies with explicit accusations. “Alvin Ailey was not someone who took to the barricades; he used his art to make his point,” she says. “It is no longer surprising to see Black bodies on the scene, but it is still effective. We still see prejudice, racism, and political unrest. I think that art is still the most effective way to make your truth known today,” she says.

Staying upright

From a business perspective, running a large dance company has become more difficult in recent years. In the past, federal and local governments partially funded international tours by cultural institutions to promote American culture. Those sources of funding for such exchanges have since largely dried up, and this presents challenges, especially since the organization wants to keep ticket prices relatively low so as not to exclude potential visitors.

“We are exploring how we can do more with streaming and would like to be present at other events. One day, we could be at the Super Bowl or the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games. We need to remain highly recognizable as a brand for artistic excellence,” says an ambitious Graf Mack. “Even if the ground shifts beneath your feet, you can stay standing.”

The international audience will not have to miss the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater anytime soon. This autumn marks the start of the first international tour organized by Graf Mack. Consequently, the company will make a stop in Belgium for the first time since the turn of the century. Visitors can choose between two full-evening programs. Ailey Legacy presents various works from the repertoire of the world-renowned choreographer and that of his successors. New Works, on the other hand, offers a platform to creators who have not yet been able to present their productions in Belgium. Since Revelations remains the ultimate Ailey choreography for many, it will be part of both programs.

“I had seen a recording of the performance before but never expected it to make such an impression on me live,” says a man as the last note of Revelations has sounded at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

At the back of the hall, Graf Mack smiles as she sees the audience rise to their feet and prompt the dancers for an encore. “The reactions abroad are even more exuberant than here, just wait,” she says. Shifting ground appears to be no problem for now for a dance company that knows better than anyone how important flexibility is.

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs at Vorst Nationaal between October 1 and 4.

Chicago Tribune
‘Chicago feels very familiar’
By: Darcel Rockett
April 19, 2026

‘Chicago feels very familiar’

Meet Alicia Graf Mack, Alvin Ailey’s newest artistic director

By Darcel Rockett
CHICAGO TRIBUNE



Alicia Graf Mack in front of Judith Jamison’s mural at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater headquarters at the Joan Weill Center for Dance in New York City. ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

Look through imagery of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and you’ll see years of works of artistry that showcase Black bodies defying gravity with grace, power and deep emotion. Some of those pictures might be of Alicia Graf Mack in her tilted, lithe aerial side split. The former principal Ailey dancer (from 2005 to 2014) is now the dance company’s new artistic director, only the fourth artistic director since the New York company’s formation by its namesake in 1958.

Graf Mack’s inaugural curation of an Ailey season can be seen at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago April 24-26, an engagement that brings the company to the location for the 57th time to conclude the Auditorium’s 2025-26 Celebrating Women Leaders in Dance season with two programs and six new works, including Chicago premieres and the Alvin Ailey masterpiece finale “Revelations.”

Before rejoining Ailey in her new role, Graf Mack was mentored by the late Jamison, a former Alvin Ailey artistic director. Graf Mack’s career is a mix of performance, leadership and dance education that began with the Dance Theatre of Harlem, where she was principal ballerina, and extended to performances with Complexions Contemporary Ballet and guest appearances with Alonzo King LINES Ballet. Graf Mack returned to Ailey after serving as dean and director of the Dance Division at The Juilliard School from 2018 to 2025 — the first Black person and the youngest to do so.

“As a dancer, I have probably danced in Chicago every year,” Graf Mack said. “Chicago is where I got engaged. I have family there. My children and husband often go to Chicago to be in a bigger city. I have family there who have a restaurant (Ja’ Grill in Hyde Park) that I love to go to. Chicago feels very familiar; I like the energy.”

Graf Mack, an East Coast girl now living in East St. Louis, raising her family, spoke with the Tribune about stepping into the new position and the tone she plans to set going forward. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What can longtime fans and new fans expect under your tenure?
A: I think people can expect to feel that they’re stepping into the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater that they love and respect and look forward to, and just like Mr. Ailey did, we will always bring fresh voices and new works to the stage, while honoring the legacy that we are honored to represent.

Q: This April performance schedule looks like you’re paying homage to the ancestors while talking about community and love.
A: You are so right. That is what it is, that is who I am as a person. I aim to always be authentic with how I walk through this world and how I lead and how I see Ailey is, it is always in tribute to the people who came before us, especially Mr. Ailey himself. That is the through-line aesthetic that we will always hold to, even when we make new works and we innovate.

There are six new works that we are presenting this year in Chicago, the first is “Blink of an Eye” by Medhi Walerski. This piece is set to the music of Bach. What I love is that through this very virtuosic movement, we make this very old music feel contemporary, vibrant, and new. Then there is “Embrace” by Fredrick Earl Mosley, set to popular music by Stevie Wonder, Maxwell, Ed Sheeran and Pink — songs that help to connect to our audiences. Something that is very much part of the Ailey aesthetic is that the work is never so abstract or intellectual that we lose our audience. Using popular music helps connect to the audience with music that they know. We have a work called “Difference Between” by Matthew Neenan, set to a canvas of music by Heather Christian. It is a work about community and connection.

There’s also “Song of the Anchorite,” a solo created by Jamar Roberts, a longtime dancer in the company. It is inspired by a solo that Alvin Ailey created for himself in 1961 called “Hermit Songs.” Then we have “Jazz Island” by Maija Garcia — a Caribbean folktale written by Geoffrey Holder, another one of our Ailey ancestors, from a short story called “Black Gods, Green Islands.” We have a new production of “A Case of You,” choreographed by Judith Jamison, as we always want to keep her voice alive in our repertory. I feel very connected to this work because it is the first work that I learned in 2005 when I joined the company. I thought it was fitting in my first year to bring it back. Lastly, we have “Grace” by Ronald K. Brown, set to the music of Fela Kúti, Jennifer Holliday and others. It is a signature, classic work that always brings the house down.

Q: What was it like to be mentored by Jamison?
A: Amazing. She was a singular, graceful visionary who was always very intentional... she always appeared like a form of the divine, like she was not of this earth. She was a very tough director. I very much respected that professional relationship. However, when she became artistic director emerita, and I went on building a family, having kids, starting a new chapter in my career, she then became more of a motherly figure, asking about the kids. When I started to lead at Juilliard, she was a huge support. She would come to the performances. She started following the students’ growth over the years. She was a cheerleader in every way to me, but also to so many people.

Q: What was it like leading Juilliard?
A: Leading at Juilliard was an incredible opportunity for me to continue to grow my leadership skills and for me to continue to impart all of the knowledge that I had gained over my life as a dancer and a professor to some of the most gifted young people on this planet. It allowed me to cultivate an eye, an aesthetic for a very high quality of excellence in the arts. It honed my ability to identify talent, to grow talent, to nurture artists, to create an environment where artists could thrive. That meant looking at it from an inclusion and diversity lens, a holistic look at what kind of environment and culture you need to make so that you create an atmosphere of excellence from many different perspectives.

Q: Your tenure at Juilliard centered on diversity, equity and inclusion. What does it mean to be doing this work now in the current climate?
A: Ailey, the company, and Ailey himself as a man, has always been a beacon of hope, spirit, joy and authenticity for individuals and for the world. Mr. Ailey was a product of being a child in the Jim Crow Era South. He built this empire on the idea of beauty and the dignity of people of color in the United States and Black Americans, and wanted to showcase that beauty on the highest level, and that is what we continue to do in 2026. Despite the cultural climate, we continue to aim to be that beacon of light for people and a demonstration of the power of the performing arts to create incredible connections, bridges across divisions.



“As a dancer, I have probably danced in Chicago every year,” Graf Mack said. ANDREW ECCLES

Q: At Juilliard, you were trying to change the culture; now you’re at Alvin Ailey pushing the envelope. How different is that pivot for you as a creator?
A: From the outside, it can look like at Juilliard, the diversity piece was at the forefront. But honestly, it was the idea of what I had experienced at Ailey as a dancer — the idea that your identity, body type and uniqueness are seen as an asset. That is what I aimed to bring to Juilliard: the idea that our diversity brings a richness of ideas, which then makes our artistry even more excellent. That is something that I experienced firsthand being a dancer with Ailey, and what I aim to bring to all spaces, not just Juilliard. At Ailey, I aim to do the exact same thing. We have dancers of color, dancers who represent the beauty of the world in our company, in our schools — extremely diverse, and we always want to amplify and honor that to be an example for the rest of the field and the rest of the world. I think the work is the same idea. How I operate has not shifted, even though now I’m working within a different space.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs April 24 at 7:30 p.m.; April 25 at 1 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.; and April 26 at 3 p.m. at the Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Ida B. Wells Drive; tickets from $46 at 312-341-2300 and auditoriumtheatre.org/events

Harper's BAZAAR

Alicia Graf Mack Knows Dance Is About Connecting the Past, Present, and Future

Alvin Ailey's new artistic director on legacy, leadership, and navigating a fraught political landscape

By: Stephen Mooallem and Photographed by Angalis Field

April 8, 2026

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Ten WORLD BUILDERS, THINKERS, *and* DOERS *on finding the* URGENCY *and* INSPIRATION *to make* SENSE—*and* ART—*out of this* MOMENT

Essay by DANEZ SMITH

ALICIA GRAF MACK, DANCER & ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

This is my third time at Alvin Ailey: first as a dancer in 2005, then returning after an injury and years in higher education and arts administration, and now as artistic director. Each chapter has prepared me to lead differently. I'm not only developing artistry and curating seasons; I'm fundraising, working with our board, thinking about marketing, partnerships, sustainability. Alvin Ailey was so ahead of his time that his vision still feels like the blueprint. In 1958, when ballet companies were telling Eurocentric stories of kings and queens, he put Black life on stage—our spirituality, our struggles, our joy—and insisted it was universal. He said dance came from the people and should always be delivered back to the people. That's still our mantra. Today, standing on stage as a company comprised primarily of dancers of color from all over the world—with different body types, different backgrounds—and speaking truths through the body is radical. I'm in Washington, D.C., right now. I grew up in this area. As a kid, I came to the Kennedy Center and saw my dreams unfold on stage. That experience created a pathway for my life. So when arts institutions are under pressure, when funding shifts or leadership changes, I think about the child sitting in that theater whose life could be transformed. Our mission is not only about excellence in dance, though we demand that. It's about legacy, access, community, connecting humanity. I sit at Alvin Ailey's desk. Judith Jamison's furniture is still in my office. Carmen de Lavallade was my mentor. I look at how they created hope in their generations. Their spirits are alive in our work. When you know where you come from, you know how to build forward, even now.

AS TOLD TO STEPHEN MOOALLEM
PHOTOGRAPH BY ANGALIS FIELD



Alicia Graf Mack with dancers Yannick Lebrun (seated), Sebastian Garcia, and Corrin Rachelle Mitchell at the Alvin Ailey Studios at the Joan Weill Center for Dance in New York. All clothes, their own.

Bay Area News Group
Alvin Ailey back in Bay Area with new director
By Lou Fancher
April 2, 2026

ARTS + MUSIC

Alvin Ailey back in Bay Area with new director

Troupe's Berkeley residency includes six premieres and old favorite of fans

By Lou Fancher
CORRESPONDENT



The esteemed Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre returns to UC Berkeley for its annual mini-residency Tuesday through March 12, during which it will perform "Revelations," one of the company's most famous works. **DARIO CALMESE/ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER**

Performing at UC Berkeley through Sunday in its annual residency presented by Cal Performances, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 2026 is led by new artistic director Alicia Graf Mack. As just the fourth artistic director in the internationally acclaimed dance company's nearly 70-year old history, Mack joins elite company.



Mack

Alvin Ailey founded the company in 1958 and in 1989 passed the leadership to the venerable dancer, choreographer, and educator Judith Jamison. Jamison led the company for 21 years before passing the baton to Robert Battle in 2011. He served for 12 years and departed the position in 2023.

Importantly, both Jamison and Battle continued Ailey's vision that included the company not be a simple repository for his 79 ballets. Under their leadership, the company expanded its repertoire while continuing to bring greatest visibility to Ailey's legacy works and the richness of African-American history and culture.

Mack appears cut from the same cloth, a fact made evident in this year's four programs that include six Bay Area premieres, a reimagined solo and an entirely new ensemble work, as well as the return of Ailey's spectacular, beloved "Revelations," which closes all but one program.

Mack established her career as a renowned, principle dancer with the Dance Theatre of Harlem before joining the Ailey company as a principal dancer for eight seasons, from 2005-2008 and 2011-2014. Invited into the company by Jamison, Mack says in an interview that former artistic director's death in 2024 represents a profound loss.

"I've often said, she was our North Star; the person you saw as a young person who allowed you to affirm your dreams," Mack says. "Ms. Jamison was that person for me since I was a child. Coming to the company (as an adult), the opportunity to work with her was an affirmation of the past. I'd been following her with the understanding that if she could do it, with her long, brown body, I could do it too."

Mack is biracial and at 5-feet, 10 inches, she is tall, especially for a professional ballet dancer. Even so, she says Jamison never asked her to be anything other than genuine.

"My presence, height, look, and strengths were valued. Even after I retired fully from dancing and went into leadership roles and became a wife and a mother, she continued to be a mentor. My daughter is dancing now and I'd send pictures to her. She'd say 'good job being a mom' and no one had better me-mojis than she did. I miss that every day."

Another guiding light in Mack's life is her mother.

"It sounds cliché, but my mother has always been an important figure in my leadership journey. She never pushed me to do one thing over another. She created an environment and modeled herself as a woman of incredible grace and grit. She's also tall, my height. My father is African-American, my mother is white and a Christian woman."

Born in San Jose, and growing up as an interracial child in a predominantly white environment in Columbia, Maryland, she treasures the example set by her mother. "She showed me how to walk with pride, purpose, and an understanding of a gifted future. She was not a dance mom, but always said I had a God-given gift that comes with great responsibility. The way you carry yourself in an audition, on stage, and in rehearsal is always giving thanks to god. My presence onstage is more than being a great dancer; it's representing something larger than myself. I am an ambassador for our culture, the field, and certainly, for Black America."

Mack's academic background further boosts her leadership capabilities. She is a Columbia University graduate (magna cum laude, honors in history) and holds an MA in nonprofit management from Washington University in St. Louis. Prior to joining Ailey as artistic director, she was the Dean and Director of the Dance Division at The Juilliard School from 2018-2025.

Which means a compendium of influences hold sway as she helms the company. From academic pedigree to injuries that resulted in ankle, back, and three knee surgeries to folks who tell her, "I adored Arnie Graf," her community organizer/civil rights activist father to even what her plié reveals, Mack extracts applicable life/work lessons.

"My plié is nothing special," is her first answer about a dancer's bending knee that launches the beginning, ending, and transitions between every maneuver in dance. Encouraged to dig into the reply, she says, "I suppose it does demonstrate the roadblocks I've experienced. There's my determination to be correct, to endure difficult ups and downs as anybody would who's pursuing a big dream. Every setback I had in my body I gained experience that led me to where I am today. Life for me has to be peaks and valleys. Now, in a leadership position, I have to see the whole picture."

Highlighting special features of a few of this year's dances, Mack says Medhi Walerski's complete "Blink of an Eye" premiered with Netherlands Dance Theatre in 2011 and involved elements of theater and more. She invited Walerksi to Juilliard and asked him make a version using only the "dance-y, virtuoso" sections using J.S. Bach's violin sonatas and partita. "Curating for this season alongside Mathew Rushing, our associate artistic director, we thought this would make a shiny gem. It's beautifully structured, touching, musical. The Ailey dancers with their artistic maturity take it to a whole other level and continue to keep it fresh while stretching the limits of their physicality. They go to the edge in each performance. There's technical excellence, virtuosity, and the beauty of the human body taken to extreme physicality."

Lou Fancher is a freelance writer. Reach her at lou@johnsonandfancher.com.

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER
Presented by Cal Performances
When & where: Tuesday through March 12; Zellerbach Hall, UC Berkeley
Tickets: $38-$114; calperformances.org

The Washington Post

A Dance Leader's Revelatory Journey

Once a young fan, Alicia Graf Mack is now the Artistic Director of Alvin Ailey

By: Celia Wren

January 30, 2026

A dance leader's revelatory journey

Once a young fan, Alicia Graf Mack is now artistic director of Alvin Ailey

BY CELIA WREN

Alicia Graf Mack remembers when the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater became her North Star. She was about 8 years old, growing up in Howard County, Maryland, when she saw a VHS tape of the solo "Cry," an Ailey classic.

Graf Mack remembers "being so taken by what I was seeing on my television: this image of this beautiful, tall — *I'm* extremely tall — Black woman that was obviously so communicative and expressive in her movement. I'd also never seen a dancer wear cornrows in her hair." And the performer on the tape, Donna Wood, was "someone with my skin tone."



WILLIAM HILTON

Decades later, after an acclaimed career as a dancer and status-quo-disrupting educator, Graf Mack, 46, is the newest artistic director of Ailey — the fourth in its nearly 68-year history — presiding over the renowned New York-based company as it arrives in Washington to launch a national tour from the Warner Theatre.

In recent years, the troupe was an annual visitor to the Kennedy Center — but it has played the Warner in the past, and its 2026 arrangement with the venue allows for more D.C. performances than it had at the center, the company says. The upcoming lineup of different programs will include legacy highlights such as "Revelations" but also new repertoire, including Jamar Roberts's "Song of the Anchorite" and Fredrick Earl Mosley's "Embrace," which is set to tunes by pop artists including Stevie Wonder, Ed Sheeran and Pink.

Same city, different location. Old favorites, new voices. The balance between continuity and novelty is

SEE GRAF MACK ON 17

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ANDREW ECCLES

ABOVE: Alicia Graf Mack is artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater after a career as a dancer and trailblazing educator. LEFT: One of her early inspirations was Alvin Ailey dancer Donna Wood, tall and expressive.

THE WASHINGTON POST · FRIDAY, JANUARY 30, 2026

GRAF MACK FROM 16

in keeping with what Graf Mack, 46, sees as her mandate, as she explained via Zoom from Illinois, where she lives with her husband and children when not away on Ailey duties.

"Something that I am committed to," she says, "is to uplift the aesthetic, the mission, the original intent of the company," which includes a "blueprint for innovation" set down by modern dance visionary Alvin Ailey, who wanted his company to be a platform for other choreographers, not merely for himself.

Washington-region arts helped ink the blueprint for Graf Mack's career. Raised in Columbia and Ellicott City by supportive parents, a Howard University professor and a community organizer, she started dance classes at age 2½. Training at Kinetics Dance Theatre and other organizations exposed her to multiple styles, and she saw the Ailey company perform live in D.C. and Baltimore.

When she was 11, she was discovered by instructor Donna Pidel, then with Ballet Royale Institute of Maryland. Reached recently by phone, Pidel remembers going holiday shopping at the mall in Columbia and noticing, among youngsters giving a recital, a kid so gifted she "looked like she had been beamed down from another planet."

Graf Mack went on to study with Pidel and focus on ballet. Even then, the young dancer showed leadership potential. "She was emotionally a very strong person who knew who she was. She was really helpful to those around her, and always very encouraging," Pidel recalls.

Graf Mack moved to New York to join Dance Theatre of Harlem, a famed ballet troupe, at age 17. Her striking height — she is 5-foot-10, or 6-foot-2 on pointe — would not impede her career. In New York, she earned an undergraduate degree in history at Columbia University. After Dance Theatre went on hiatus in 2004, she joined the Ailey company.

"Revelations," a masterpiece about pain, resilience and joy, was among the first pieces of Ailey repertoire she learned. She can still relive her first time dancing the work in public, hearing the initial "hum of 'I Been 'Buked,' the first section."

"You lift your eyes to the sky. The curtain goes up. And I remember having this feeling come over me of, 'This is the moment that you have been working so hard for,'" she says.

Set to traditional African American spirituals, "Revelations" is endlessly popular with audiences. Graf Mack says overfamiliarity is never an issue for the dancers because the choreography resonates so fully with the day-to-day.

"As a dancer, if I was feeling tired, if I was feeling frustrated, if I was feeling excited, if I had a life experience," that episode could fuel a "Revelations" performance, she says.

She does admit that it's a heavy lift to hold the iconic umbrella, as she sometimes did, in a bustling section of the piece that mulls purification and catharsis. "You're holding it for several minutes, and then you're running with it, so the resistance from the air and everything makes it quite heavy. So you have to have a good amount of strength. Which I think is also emblematic of what the work means and, again, brings authenticity to it, because you are literally trying to hold this role and this instrument" to support fellow performers.

She danced with Ailey from 2005 to 2008 and — after an injury-prompted break during which she got married and earned a master's — again from 2011 to 2014. She subsequently became the dean and director of the dance division at the Juilliard School, where she shook up the curriculum, adding West African dance and hip-hop emphases and permitting students to study pointe technique regardless of gender.

Last June, shortly before she officially took over as artistic director, the Ailey company announced that its 2026 Washington sojourn would be at the Warner and promoted by the entertainment entity Live Nation. The shift from the Kennedy Center was perhaps all the more striking because Ailey dancers helped launch the center in 1971, performing in the premiere of Leonard Bernstein's "Mass," which dance maker Ailey choreographed.

Graf Mack explains the decision by saying: "We have such a loyal, enthusiastic community of supporters in Washington, D.C., and we had the opportunity to partner with Live Nation to present 11 performances as an expanded run at the Warner Theatre. So we felt that that was the best way to bring our work to the D.C. community." (The company's most recent Kennedy Center stints were under a week.)

Asked whether the move had anything to do with the Trump administration, which has instituted a presidential takeover of the Kennedy Center, with resulting artist withdrawals, Graf Mack said: "We want to bring great dance to the people. That is the mission of the [Ailey company]. Mr. Ailey always stated that dance came from the people and should always be delivered back to the people. And the opportunity to perform at the Warner Theatre allowed us to have 11 expansive performances, and we're able to present more programs, distinctly different programs. This is an exciting opportunity."

So how does she approach an era when American artists may fear political fallout, and the values of diversity, equity and inclusion are often under partisan siege?

"The Ailey organization approaches the work as we have always approached the work," Graf Mack says. "Since 1958, Ailey has been presenting authentic stories of Black America, stories that unite our humanity and touch our spirit. And that has been unchanged — even now, in 2026."



ANDREW ECCLES

Artistic director Alicia Graf Mack, who grew up in Maryland, stands among company members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. The troupe will perform 11 shows at the Warner Theatre in D.C.



PAUL KOLNIK



ANDREW ECCLES

ABOVE: Graf Mack performs with Jamar Roberts in Judith Jamison's "Reminiscin'." RIGHT: She holds one of the famous umbrellas as a dancer in Alvin Ailey mainstay "Revelations."



PAUL KOLNIK

The company's new repertoire includes Fredrick Earl Mosley's "Embrace," which is set to pop tunes.

MODERN LUXURY DC

Music in Motion

By Michael McCarthy
December 2025 Print Issue

by
MICHAEL McCARTHY
photographed by
TONY POWELL

MUSIC in MOTION

As the new artistic director of the renowned Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, DC native Alicia Graf Mack brings historic perspective, grace and a measured vision to the company.



Alicia Graf Mack is only the fourth artistic director at Alvin Ailey in its 70-year history.



"WE WANT TO EXPAND THE WAY WE DANCE AND MOVE, JUST AS OUR CULTURE UNFOLDS."
—ALICIA GRAF MACK

Alicia Graf Mack (@aliciagrafmack) remembers the first time she understood what it meant to be a dancer. She wasn't on a stage or in a studio, but in the living room of her childhood home in Columbia, Md.

"There was always music in the house," she recalls. Her family wasn't a dancing family, per se, but they kept the record player spinning. "We played records all the time. I would make up dances to various songs and move around the house."

From that living room, her path unfolded through classical ballet schools in Columbia, modern classes, jazz requirements, even tap ("my knees did not like tap"), and into Baltimore and Washington, where her parents took her to see live dance. She remembers watching Ailey II at the Columbia Festival for the Arts. She saw Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (@alvinailey, ailey.org) when the company toured the DMV. For a young dancer who imagined herself a classical ballerina, Ailey was "part of my North Star," she says.

That star guides her still. Graf Mack has become only the fourth artistic director in the company's nearly 70-year history—an astonishing lineage given the company's influence. And this winter, when Ailey brings its annual performances to the Warner Theatre (Jan. 30-Feb 8; gala benefit, Feb. 4, warnertheatredc.com), the company will kick off its entire U.S. tour here in DC, marking her first season at the helm.

It is, in every sense, a homecoming.

"It feels very special to start the tour in the DMV," she says. "A place where I can invite my family and my parents." They now live in Ellicott City. She'll need a sizable ticket block to accommodate her local fans.

Most of those friends and family have watched her dance trajectory with glee. Graf Mack's career started with the Dance Theatre of Harlem under Arthur Mitchell, quickly ascending to become a highly recognized principal ballerina. A celebrated artist, she later performed with Complexions Contemporary Ballet and made guest appearances with Alonzo King LINES Ballet. Her versatility led to collaborations with a diverse array of artists, including Beyoncé, John Legend, Alicia Keys and Jon Batiste.

Stepping into the artistic director role at Ailey doesn't intimidate her. If anything, she finds comfort in the clarity of the company's mission. Mr. Ailey's vision always guides men," she says. "His strength, courage and authenticity—those still stand true today." The legacy doesn't weigh on her; it buoys her. "I feel lucky to be the artistic director of an institution with a clear direction, a foundation, an identity."

But she is also unequivocally forward-looking. What's different about Graf Mack from her predecessors is that she's a dancer, not a choreographer. While she'll always create, curation will be a large part of her vision. "We want to introduce new choreographers, new voices. We want to expand the way we dance and move, just as our culture unfolds. But we're always guided by the legacy," she says.

That fusion—tradition held in one hand, evolution in the other—animates her first season. The performances will include an All Ailey program with quintessential classics by Alvin Ailey, featuring "Memoria," "Night Creature," a revival of "A Song for You," Ailey's iconic "Cry," and, of course, the transcendent "Revelations."

"These are the works people come home to," she says.

But the premiere will also showcase new or newly imagined works, including pieces by Fredrick Earl Mosley (@earlmosley_diversityofdance) and Matthew Neenan (@matthewneenan). Among the most anticipated is "Song of the Anchorite," a re-envisioning of Alvin Ailey's

"Hermit Songs" solo choreographed by her longtime collaborator and former dance partner, Jamar Roberts (@jamarrobertsofficial).

Roberts and Graf Mack began discussing the idea while looking at photographs from "Hermit Songs" at the Whitney Museum's *Edges of Ailey* exhibition.

"We thought we knew it because the photos are so much a part of our identity," she explains. With help from Ailey's archivists, they located rehearsal footage in which Ailey could be heard coaching but was never seen. Roberts took the opera libretto, changed the music and created a new solo "that imagines what Mr. Ailey would create today," she says. "There are many nods to the original. It honors the past but speaks now."

Another highlight, "Blink of an Eye" by Medhi Walerski, expands the company's technical boundaries. "The Ailey dancers are already the most virtuosic and expressive artists on the planet," she says. "This piece stretches them in new ways. As soon as audiences see it, they'll say, 'Ah, that makes sense.'"

If Graf Mack's artistic perspective is expansive, her leadership approach is equally textured and long in the making. The myth of the dancer pulled overnight from the stage into the corner office evaporates quickly when she talks about her rise.

"Sometimes people think I came out of the blue," she says with a smile. "But I was always educating myself." She studied at Columbia University, interned at JPMorgan and earned a master's degree in nonprofit management. She shadowed Ailey's former executive director, served as the company's union delegate, and spent nearly 12 years teaching in higher education (she was an assistant professor at Webster University and adjunct professor at the University of Houston and Washington University).

In addition to academic leadership, Graf Mack served as the first Black dean and director of the dance division at Juilliard School (where she received an honorary doctorate in 2025), also holding the distinction of being the youngest person ever to hold that role. This prepared her not only to lead an arts institution but to do so with an artist's sensibility.

"I lead in the way an artist would—by being of service," she says. Teaching is foundational: she holds pedagogy training from the Ailey School and a teaching certificate from American Ballet Theatre. Her philosophy is simple: "See the artist before you. Honor who they are. Bring their gifts forward."

She calls it her joy to witness dancers reach their revelatory moments: the instant when a dancer stops performing steps and becomes "music in motion," fully engrossed in story and character. "That's the high every artist craves," she says. "And that's when I know they've been successful."

As Graf Mack prepares to bring the company home to DC this February, there is both an inevitability and a freshness to the moment. The child who once floated through her Columbia living room now guides one of the world's most important cultural institutions.

She's still dancing, only now through others. And if her vision is any indication, Ailey's next decade and beyond will continue to honor the past while pushing into the future with clarity, courage and joy.



Alicia Graf Mack brings Alvin Ailey to DC this winter at Warner Theatre, Jan. 30-Feb. 8.

"Sometimes people think I came out of the blue. But I was always educating myself."
–ALICIA GRAF MACK

The New York Times

Recalling the Creation of *Grace*

By: Gia Kourlas

December 8, 2024

Dance



PHOTOGRAPH BY SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Recalling the Creation of 'Grace'

Ronald K. Brown's fervent work celebrates 25 years, and enjoys a new production.

By GIA KOURLAS

She is transcendent and glowing: a mysterious woman in white. Standing center stage in a bandeau top with a strip of transparent fabric hanging down her front, and wide, loose pants, she remains still and rooted. This dancer, the mother god of Ronald K. Brown's "Grace," anchors the stage with a quiet strength as the sound of Duke Ellington's "Come Sunday" builds, calling her body — and with it her costume, its fabric swelling and dipping like waves — to action.

She reaches her arms up and out, spinning fervently and pausing to hold out one arm and then the other as if she were protecting a precious flock. Lyrics echo across the stage: "God of love, please look down and see my people through."

This season at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, "Grace" celebrates its 25th anniversary. The dance, which weaves together modern and contemporary dance with West African forms, was a masterpiece from the start. It was Brown's first commission for Ailey — and it transformed the company. There was ease, intention, a silken, unforced approach to finding new rhythms.

Brown choreographed "Grace" with Renee Robinson, the Ailey company's reigning queen at the time, as its centerpiece. The story is this: "The mother god comes down with angels," Brown said during a recent interview at the Ailey studios. "She rounds up people who are behaving as if they don't understand God's grace."

Book-ended by two versions of Ellington's "Come Sunday" — by Jimmy McPhail at the start, Jennifer Holiday at the end — Brown's rapturous dance is meant to stir the soul. The costumes help tell the story: In Omotayo Wunmi Olaiya's vivid, sculptural designs, the angels wear white and the earthly people red. By the end, they are all in white — they have found grace — and the journey to get there is transfixing, pulsating and galvanizing.

Through his layering of movement idioms and music — there is also Roy Davis Jr.'s house track "Rock Shock" and Fela Kuti's "Shakara" — Brown has a masterful way of digging into spirituality, of giving it a hypnotic groove. The stage can seem buoyant, as if celestial bodies are dancing on clouds.

For the Ailey company, learning Brown's movement meant learning to dance differently — with less overt power. "I think of it in terms of like, we want to speak heart to heart, spirit to spirit," Brown said. "So you don't have to push because if you're doing everything, what is God going to do?"

Now "Grace" is transformed with a new cast. (Only one original dancer, Vernard J. Gilmore, remains — "I am the last Mohican," he said.) The mother god figure will be danced alternately by Constance Stamatiou and Coral Dolphin, who performed in "Grace" as a dancer in Evidence, Brown's company. Solomon Dumas and Hannah Alissa Richardson, Evidence-turned-Ailey dancers, are performing it, too.

Back in 1999, Brown, a well-regarded choreographer, knew that he would need to come to his first Ailey commission prepared, so he choreographed "Grace" on his Evidence dancers. He created the mother god role on Angelica Edwards.

Brown, sitting at Ailey with Arcell Cabuag, his life partner and the associate artistic director of Evidence, said that the night in December when "Grace" premiered was a whirlwind. Now he's just gratified to have the dance back in his life. In 2021, he suffered a stroke. Recently, he said, he had been talking to a dancer who had been in a car accident a while back. "I called him and I said: 'I'm working on "Grace" a lot. What is it?' And he said, 'It's getting another chance when you really don't deserve it.' "

Brown is finding solace in this dance on a personal level, too. "It was beautiful and amazing, in recovery," he said, "to come back to the work and its grace, because that's how we're living."

In interviews, Brown and Olaiya, along with dancers past and present, spoke about their memories of creating "Grace" and why it's so enduring. Below are edited excerpts.

RONALD K. BROWN, *choreographer* I knew Mr. Ailey loved Duke Ellington, and I looked and looked and looked. He did a version of "Come Sunday" — a choral version, Mahalia Jackson singing. But one version was sung by a man. I said, Oh goodness, I'll use that. And what if that God figure was a woman? I said, OK, that's the piece. Because of the man's voice, I thought that would be really a nice kind of contrast.





PAUL KOLNIK

Top and above, from Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's 1999 premiere of Ronald K. Brown's "Grace." Left, Brown, seated at center, with Ronni Favors, Ailey's rehearsal director, working on "Grace" in September.

RENEE ROBINSON, *original lead* One thing that I remember about Ron would be his patience. *Impressive* patience. He would say, "OK, go and work on it," and then he would start working with someone else. I would notice that we would slowly be drifting toward where he was in the studio. We wanted to be close to him. We wanted to get the full understanding of the look of his style. There was his beautiful way that he hears the rhythms, and where he places a gesture or a pause or suspension. I remember thinking to myself: Why is it that my entire body does not look like his? I feel like I'm doing the steps. Why can't I create that shape?

ANGELICA EDWARDS, *Evidence dancer on whom Brown created the mother god choreography* Ron lets the part pick you. Renee was the mother of that company, so it was easy to put her in the mother role. She was a role model for everyone. I feel like she always worried about the steps and the shapes and, *Am I doing it right?* She's a perfectionist. But she always was doing it right because it was *her*.

OMOTAYO WUNMI OLAIYA, *costume designer* When he told me the story of this journey, I saw fire and cool — that's where the calmness comes in with the white. The mother is like an angel, so she's that white." She's the one who is trying to pull everyone into place. And slowly and gently everyone transitions to that cool place. They find grace when they transition into the white.

BROWN "Wunmi said, 'Ron, I think it's red and white,' and I said, 'Wunmi, I trust you!' "

ROBINSON I went in to get my costume, and I said, "Well, where is my top?" And they said: "That's it. This part right here is like a bandeau. It just goes across your breasts." Ron said he wanted that elegance, the simplicity.

OLAIYA I didn't go for an obvious "mommy" look. I wanted somebody gracefully embodying the feminine — that you cannot deny that it's all woman and sensual, but yet it's so angelic. How do you put that all together in one look? I wanted it to flow. I chose for her to wear pants. I wanted to show her physique. And it was like not going for the obvious: a dress. I feel like a woman in a pantsuit is quite powerful. It was like me having a pantsuit, but it wasn't a pantsuit.

ROBINSON What I remember from opening night is we wanted it to be so good, and we wanted it to be good for Ron Brown. It was his first work on the company, and we liked it so much! But in certain sections, we were still going through the process of getting it right. So I remember us agreeing: "I'm still not sure when to come in. I think I hear it. So we're going to count each other in, and then we'll look at each other in the wing or once we're out there. When I turn upstage, make sure you look over at me and make sure that we are together." That heightened the dynamic of being aware of one another.

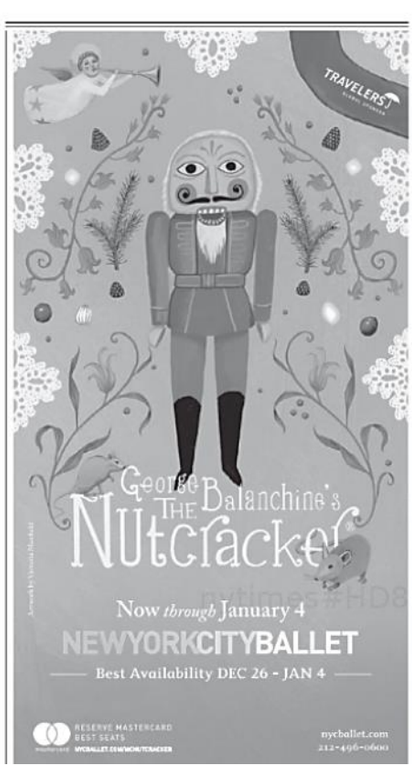
Do I dare say we had agreed to give each other grace or show each other grace by doing that kind of support for one another?

SOLOMON DUMAS, *current dancer* The idea of grace is that we receive blessings when we don't even deserve it. I think when you watch the piece, you understand that it's not forcing anything, but it's just an extension, an expansion of a thought. And you don't leave the theater needing to feel like, Oh, I've got to go to church! If that happens, good for you. It's like when Mr. Ailey said he wants to hold up a mirror to society to show people how beautiful they are; I do believe that Ron is a manifestation of that expression.

BROWN We come back to "Come Sunday," which is probably the explanation of "Grace," because they get another chance. And so the couples get to hug each other and say, "I'm sorry that I behaved the way I did." So they're kind of asking for forgiveness. And then they get another chance. Except for their young son [an unofficial character in the dance] who still steps out because he didn't learn the lesson. And then he's scolded by the mother god. It's one of my favorite moments in the piece.

CORAL DOLPHIN, *current dancer* It's almost like [the son figure] raises his voice with me. And as a mother god figure, I tell him to settle down. You can see it in the movement, I'm like, "Calm down." He comes at me hard, and I come at him softer. And you can see that there is this sense of me trying to soothe his spirit. He does this repetitively and it speeds up. I put my hand on his back and his head to just tell him to stop. Release it. Let it go. Give it to God. And then his movement becomes a bit slower, softer, like mine. And we become a reflection of one another. And then we all walk through the light.

OLAIYA I cry every time it ends because you feel like you went through the journey with them to find their grace, to be comfortable with their grace, to be at one. That's the piece. It doesn't matter how many times you've seen it, it gets you. It grabs you. You hold your breath through the whole dance, and at the end, you just got nothing but to scream.



ESSENCE

Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* Returns To Houston With A Celebration Of Black Artistic Expression

For more than six decades, Alvin Ailey's work has told the story of the Black experience through movement, and today, his legacy continues to resonate with audiences across the United States.

By: Shelby Stewart

March 9, 2026



The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is currently traveling the country on a months-long tour led by its newly appointed creative director, Alicia Graf Mack, who assumed the role in November 2024. For Graf Mack, her approach to leading the company is rooted in the vision of its namesake founder. "I follow the blueprint that Mr. Ailey set from the start," she tells ESSENCE, describing the company as a space where artists can express their voices, stories, and experiences on stage.

That blueprint also reflects Ailey's belief in a repertory company—one that serves as a platform for multiple choreographic voices, not just the founder's. Graf Mack explains that this philosophy allows the company to continue stretching the boundaries of dance while remaining grounded in the legacy Ailey established.

Since launching in Washington, D.C., the company has brought its repertoire to major cultural hubs including Atlanta and Austin. Yet among the many stops along the way, Houston carries particular significance. Ailey's connection to the Bayou City runs deeper than the stage, and his influence continues to shape generations of artists. Even Tina Knowles recalls in her memoir, *Matriarch*, that as a child in Galveston, she never imagined leaving her small town—until a trip to Houston to see the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater opened her eyes to the possibilities beyond.



Born in Rogers, Texas, Ailey drew on the rhythms and spiritual traditions of his rural Southern upbringing to create some of his most profound choreography. Chief among them is *Revelations*, the company's signature masterpiece, which continues to anchor performances on this national tour. Created in 1960, the work draws on the movement, music, and spirituals of the African-American church, particularly the Black Baptist tradition, with pieces such as "I Been 'Buked," "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel," "Wade in the Water," and "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham."

Founded in the midst of the civil rights era, the company was born from Ailey's desire to create space for the fullness of the Black experience onstage. Growing up in the Jim Crow South shaped that vision, Graf Mack explains. "Mr. Ailey wanted to give space to the Black experience in a dignified and very expressive way when he created the company. He grew up during the Jim Crow era. He experienced extreme racism. He experienced the ugly and the beauty of our country," she says. "I draw strength from his original ideas that, while he was not a political person, he wanted to address our society through his art. We continue to do that today by standing boldly on the stage, by touring widely across the United States, and by arming our talent and beauty and excellence all around the world."

That vision continues to shape the dancers who bring Ailey's work to life today. Houston native Isabel Wallace-Green, the ensemble's only Texas-born member, says performing *Revelations* demands both openness and courage—to step beyond what feels familiar while remaining fully present as an artist. "He didn't want cookie-cutter dancers," she says of Ailey's vision. "He wanted real humans who are individuals and make different artistic choices and view the world differently. There has to be a fearlessness in bringing yourself to the table fully and authentically—beautifully and imperfectly."

For Wallace-Green, performing the work in her hometown is especially meaningful. "It's definitely transformational and transcendent," she says. "Regardless of what's going on personally or what's happening in the world, it's rare that we have moments to quiet our bodies and souls and tap into a communal spiritual experience with people we

know and love — like my coworkers — but also complete strangers in the audience. Even just walking the streets of downtown, blocks away from Jones Hall, is surreal, and I feel immense gratitude for the city and the community that really raised me and got me to where I am today. Houston is always a safe refuge to return to."



Her connection to the city began long before she joined the company. As a child, Wallace-Green remembers sitting in the audience at Jones Hall when her parents took her to see Alvin Ailey on tour. Trained primarily in ballet at the time, she recalls being struck by the difference in movement and by seeing dancers who reflected a wider range of identities than she was used to. Years later, attending the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program in New York deepened her connection to the company and helped her imagine a future with the very institution that had inspired her as a child.

Wallace-Green's homecoming reflects a broader truth: for Houston audiences, Ailey's visits have long been a cultural touchstone. This year marks the 21st consecutive season that the company has performed with Performing Arts Houston, a partnership that has helped solidify the city's reputation as a major hub for dance and the performing arts. The nonprofit also approaches its 60th anniversary season next year.

Meg Booth, CEO of Performing Arts Houston, says the relationship between the company and the Houston-based organization has become a tradition. "For decades, Performing Arts Houston has brought the company back again and again, allowing generations of Houstonians to experience one of the most powerful artistic voices in American culture," she explains. That relationship, Booth notes, is part of what makes the company's work resonate so strongly in a city with such a rich cultural fabric. She adds that Ailey is more than a performance—it is both a "cultural conversation and a decades-long relationship."

The city itself pulses with Black cultural energy. Gospel music, majorette traditions, Texas Southern University's "Ocean of Soul" marching band, and a vibrant contemporary art scene mirror the energy and spirit at the heart of Ailey's work. In this context, *Revelations* touches audiences with an intensity uniquely felt in Houston. Graf Mack recalls performing in the city herself: "I remember how vibrant the relationship between audience and dancer felt. That connection is a testament to two things Alvin Ailey always placed at the forefront of his work: that dance comes from the people and should be delivered back to the people. Our work is a fusion of these movements, and I think that resonates with Houston audiences. People can see themselves in the work."

She adds that Ailey's vision—to "hold our mirror to society and show people how beautiful they are"—continues to guide her leadership. Booth echoes that sentiment, noting, "Works like *Revelations* and hundreds of other pieces in Ailey's repertory speak to shared histories of resilience, faith, and community. In a city as diverse as Houston, those stories resonate."

As the company carries its work across the country, the spirit of Alvin Ailey's vision feels more urgent than ever. His legacy was never about politics in the headlines, but about the pulse of life itself — the joy and the sorrow, the sweat and the spirit, woven into movement that speaks to our shared humanity. In a world unsettled by conflict, where headlines divide and fear can overshadow hope, the arts remain a refuge, a place to breathe, to bear witness, and to remember who we are.

Revelations carries that power in every lift, turn, and pause — born from Ailey's "blood memories" of church, blues, and Black American life. It asks audiences to feel, to connect, to see themselves in one another, and to reclaim the hope that can feel so fragile in uncertain times. In the hands of the dancers today, his work is a living testament: that art can hold us, challenge us, and remind us of the beauty and resilience of the human spirit. Through Ailey's vision, movement becomes more than performance — it becomes a language of empathy, a bridge between hearts, and a light in a world that so desperately needs it.

ARTS ATL

Meet Alvin Ailey's new artistic director — Alicia Graf Mack

By: Robin Wharton
February 3, 2026



Alicia Graf Mack, the new artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and only the fourth permanent artistic director in the company's 67-year history, was only 17 when she joined Dance Theatre of Harlem under the direction of Arthur Mitchell. At the time, especially in ballet, the typical professional dancer's career began right out of high school, and college was a place to go when it was over.

Graf Mack's path quickly diverged from that standard course when an injury and autoimmune disease derailed her plans, and she was forced to retire from the stage temporarily — for the first time — just a few years later. "My career path has been far from linear," she told ArtsATL. "But it was one that allowed me to grow my dance career with several different companies learning all kinds of dance while also developing my knowledge and experience in arts administration and education and seeing firsthand how it's possible to train professional dancers on the highest level through a higher education program."

For almost two decades, she charted her own course into and out of several professional dance companies, including another two seasons with Dance Theatre of Harlem, Complexions Contemporary Ballet, guest performances with Alonso King LINES Ballet and two separate stints with Ailey — through an undergraduate degree at Columbia, a graduate degree from Washington University in St. Louis, academic teaching and administration at Webster University and later receiving an honorary doctorate from The Juilliard School. At Juilliard, Graf Mack served as dean and director of the dance division from 2018 to 2025, the first Black woman and the youngest person ever to hold that position.

Graf Mack joined Ailey for the first time in 2005 after completing her degree at Columbia, during which time the first cohort of graduates from the Ailey/Fordham BFA in dance program took their places alongside her at the barre and on the stage. After another flare up of her autoimmune disease sidelined her again, she returned to graduate school, pursuing a master's in arts administration at Washington University, and landed an assistant professorship at Webster.

In St. Louis, she said, she "fell in love with these institutions of higher learning where dancers are right on the cusp of their career" and discovered how the profession had shifted since she first started out. Graf Mack explained, "I realized that college programs were actually producing dancers who went on to join internationally acclaimed modern dance and ballet companies. I also realized that I loved working with pre-professional dancers and preparing them for the field, guiding them into their careers." That love eventually led her to Julliard and now back, once again, to Ailey.

Graf Mack's role as artistic director encompasses leadership of the first and second companies (Ailey and Ailey II), as well as shared visioning for the community education programs and the school, including the BFA program. Some dancers still join the company right out of high school, but many are taking different paths — through the Ailey/Fordham BFA or another undergraduate degree; from commercial and competition dance; or after a few years as independent concert dance artists. At one point or another over the course of her career, Graf Mack explored each of these routes into professional company life. She said her new job with Ailey "feels like the perfect fit" for her passions and experience.

Since Graf Mack took over after the company's annual Atlanta visit last year, its 2026 run at the Fox Theatre, February 11 through February 16, will offer the city's first glimpse of how her leadership will shape the company's repertory

and its future. Graf Mack has plenty of experience putting a performance bill together and fostering choreographic voices by commissioning new work; she did both at Webster University and Julliard.

At Ailey, however, the context for and international visibility of her choices alter the stakes somewhat. As Laura Regensdorf described it in the 2022 "'We Got Very Creative': Alicia Graf Mack on Leading Juilliard's Dancers Into a New Era" feature in Vanity Fair: "Unlike an institution geared toward preservation, a place like Juilliard is necessarily kinetic, given the influx of students bringing an almost intravenous-level jolt of what's around the corner." In contrast, preservation — of the history, cultural memory and creative contributions of the African diaspora — is central to Ailey's art and the company he founded.

"It is so important to hold on to the legacy of Alvin Ailey when curating," said Graf Mack. Although she never met Ailey, she said, "I know him in the way you get to know someone when you work intimately with their creations. I also worked under Judith Jamison and Robert Battle, and, in terms of the succession, I feel like I embody their vision for the company along with my own."

"I always want to find choreographers who will innovate, who think in new ways, who have fresh voices," she continued, "but also that fit the Ailey aesthetic and understand everything the Ailey dancers can do."

The suite of dances Graf Mack and Associate Artistic Director Matthew Rushing selected for the Atlanta run highlight Graf Mack's connection to Ailey, both the artist and the company, while also engaging with one another structurally and thematically and showcasing the full scope of the dancers' technical prowess and performative artistry.



Revelations will, of course, close every program. Two of the other pieces in this repertory are similarly big dances with multiple sections and pair the Ailey/Horton movement vocabulary with instantly-recognizable music drawn from beyond the concert hall. The score for *Grace* by Ronald K. Brown ranges from jazz classics like Duke Ellington's "Come Sunday" to Kela Futi's Afropop. Graf Mack performed *Grace* while she was in the company, and she described it as an Atlanta favorite that has quickly become another signature work since the company revived it last year.

Embrace, by Frederick Earl Mosley, who started as a student at the school in the 1980s and went on to join the company and later the faculty, premiered in December at New York City Center. "When we premiered it, I looked at my artistic team, and I told them to listen, just listen, for the audience's reaction when a new song started," said Graf Mack. "It was beautiful. You could literally hear the audience respond because they automatically knew these love songs by Stevie Wonder, by Etta James, by Maxwell, Pink, Des'ree and Ed Sheeran."

Judith Jamison created the duet *A Case of You* for beloved Ailey board chair Joan Weill and later integrated it into a longer work, *Reminiscin'*. "My first rehearsals at Ailey were with Ms. Jamison learning *A Case of You*," Graf Mack recalled. "I thought it was fitting in my first season to bring it back. It's quite beautiful and touching."



Like *A Case of You*, *Song of the Anchorite*, another new work by Jamar Roberts, foregrounds the company's legacy and also holds personal significance for Graf Mack. Roberts was Graf Mack's primary partner while they were both dancing with the company, and he has subsequently become a prolific choreographer for Ailey and other companies around the world. Song of the Anchorite is an homage to Ailey's *Hermit Songs*, a solo Ailey created for himself in 1960. "You see all these references to the original Hermit Songs, but it is a new interpretation of the idea that Jamar believed Mr. Ailey had as he was creating that work," Graf Mack said.

Blink of An Eye, by Medhi Walerski, is just 12 minutes long, but Graf Mack said it's filled to bursting with innovative artistry. "It's extremely contemporary, with a lot of fine technical ballet and modern dance language," she said. "It's also extremely musical, showing both the dancers' virtuosity and their vulnerability. Mehdi allows the dancers grace

to interpret the work as they're moving so the work can continue to evolve as the dancers evolve in their exploration of it."

For her part, Graf Mack said she is just as excited to be back in Atlanta as the city's dance patrons are to have her here. "I remember performing at the Fox," she mused. "The theater itself is just gorgeous, and the feeling that you have as a dancer on that stage with the Atlanta audience is unmatched. They go on the ride with the dancers. I always loved hearing people call out their responses. That exchange of ideas, of energy, of spirit, is so germane to our company. It's so foundationally important to the vision and the mission and the aesthetic that Mr. Ailey set forth so many years ago."

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will return to the Fox Theatre February 11 through February 15. Find out more information and get tickets on the Alvin Ailey website.










The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

She's ready to move Alvin Ailey boldly forward

As the new artistic director, Alicia Graf Mack leads with authenticity and reclaims movement as storytelling.

By: Nedra Rhone
January 28, 2026



On a recent Tuesday afternoon, just hours after arriving in Atlanta, Alicia Graf Mack gathered with about 30 dancers from Spelman College for an Alvin Ailey master class.

After greeting the students by name, Graf Mack began leading a series of movements, placing a hand on her chest and breathing in deeply.

To a heavy drumbeat, the dancers fell into pliés before lifting and lengthening their bodies upward. As they moved, Graf Mack reminded them the work of dance, even during warmup, is akin to storytelling.



This moment of grounding, teaching and connecting is perhaps an early indication of what we can expect from Graf Mack in her role as the new artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, which makes its annual appearance at the Fox Theatre from Feb. 11-15.

A twice-former company member, Graf Mack is the fourth artistic director since Alvin Ailey founded the modern dance company in 1958. Ailey believed in accessible storytelling, using the power of deep personal experience to create connections through dance.

After Ailey's death in 1989, Judith Jamison, an Ailey dancer from 1965 to 1980, succeeded him as director and left an indelible mark, raising the company's profile and building its six-story home in New York City.



Jamison, who died last fall, had passed the baton to Robert Battle in 2011. In 12 years as artistic director, Battle expanded the idea of what the company could perform, adding the work of choreographers who were not versed in the Black aesthetic. During his tenure, Ailey dancers, including Graf Mack, had the freedom to interpret world class choreography in their own way.

These are the blueprints left by past directors and, when we spoke by phone a few days before her visit to Atlanta, Graf Mack said they have inspired her to move boldly forward and lead with authenticity.

"We want to make sure we are telling authentic stories and uplifting the voices of new and innovative choreographers," she said. "It takes entrepreneurial thinking to think beyond the touring model ... but always stay true to our identity as a company rooted in Mr. Ailey's mission and the values that he set forth."

It will undoubtedly be a challenge to lead a 67-year-old company through the 21st century while still honoring the vision and legacy of Ailey, but Graf Mack is well-equipped to lead the charge.



Her Ailey connections run deep. As a child, she attended company performances and pinned posters of Jamison to the walls of her bedroom.

"Every night I looked at this poster of a tall Black woman who was blazing a trail," said Graf Mack, who at 5 feet 10 inches earns comparisons to Jamison in both height and comportment. "Her impact on my life is immeasurable."

The legendary figure, who hired Graf Mack as an Ailey dancer, would also become a mentor and a model.



“I saw how she led the company but also how she would represent the company in interviews, on stage and teaching,” Graf Mack said.

After two turns with Dance Theater of Harlem beginning at age 17, Graf Mack joined Ailey in 2005. She was an immediate standout, singled out by New York critics for a star turn in her debut season. But an autoimmune condition that had interrupted her career with Dance Theater of Harlem resurfaced.

Graf Mack used the time away, in both instances, to further her education, earning a bachelor’s degree in history and a master’s degree in nonprofit management.

She returned to Ailey as a dancer in 2011 for a three-year stint before moving on to become the youngest and first Black female dean and director of the dance division at The Juilliard School.

Graf Mack spent seven years as the face of the division, curating work for the dancers to perform, developing her administrative and leaderships skills, and gaining the kind of experience that would serve her well in her new role at Ailey.

As she steps into the spotlight for her inaugural season as artistic director, she is off to a strong start.

In collaboration with associate artistic director Matthew Rushing, Graf Mack has curated a repertoire that balances new works and old favorites. For Atlanta’s popular Valentine’s Day performance, “Embrace,” a new piece by Fredrick Earl Mosley, examines love in all its shapes and forms and is set to music by Stevie Wonder, Ed Sheeran, Des’ree and other artists.

“It is a full swoon of a work that will really take the audience to a higher place,” Graf Mack said.



Also featured is “A Case of You,” a sensual duet excerpted from Jamison’s 2005 work “Reminiscin’” danced to music by Diana Krall.

“We felt it was necessary to highlight Ms. Jamison’s work, especially this year,” Graf Mack said. The piece is particularly meaningful to her, Graf Mack said, because it is the first she learned as a dancer at Ailey.

In the world premiere of “Song of the Anchorite,” Ailey choreographer Jamar Roberts presents a new take on a 1961 Ailey solo, while “Grace” marks the 25th anniversary of Ronald T. Brown’s work connecting African and American dance. A company premiere, “Blink of an Eye” by Medhi Walerski explores the relationship between dance and music.

Each performance ends with “Revelations,” Ailey’s 1960 masterpiece that serves as a tribute to his heritage and his people.

As day rolls into evening on Spelman’s campus, Graf Mack continues coaxing dancers to point to the sky, reach across the table, lengthen to infinity or tilt their heads as if letting water fall from their ears.

This is how one tells a story through dance — not moving but moving with intention. And this, it seems, is how Graf Mack is prepared to lead — not merely leading but leading with intention.

ESSENCE

A New Chapter Begins At The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

By: Okla Jones
December 26, 2025



On December 3, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater opened its 2025–26 holiday season at New York City Center with a gala that marked a turning point for the company. The five-week engagement—running through January 4—signals the first full season under Artistic Director Alicia Graf Mack, and a moment where the heralded repertory leans into what audiences expect from Ailey, while expanding its vision for the next generation.

Graf Mack, the 46-year-old mother of two, stepped into her current position with a certain level of familiarity. She danced with the company for years, an experience that informed her approach as an artistic director. In respecting her predecessors, she feels that this endeavor is a responsibility, not simply her duty.

"I am fully aware of what this role carries," she says. "I worked under Judith Jamison, who was my idol from the time I was little. I saw how she led. I also worked under Robert Battle and saw how he did things. I don't take any of that lightly. But in order to do the work that needs to be done, I can't stay frozen in the magnitude of it. I have to stay grounded. I have to be guided by what I know good dance to be, and how to create an environment where dancers can thrive."

Among the season's highlights is "Revelations," which was performed with live music for six shows during opening weekend and the gala. The season also features Jamison's "A Case of You" in a new production, alongside company premieres and five world premieres by choreographers Maija García, Fredrick Earl Mosley, Matthew Neenan, Jamar Roberts, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar in collaboration with Samantha Figgins and Chalvar Monteiro.

Alongside Matthew Rushing, Graf Mack was able to program this season with a bit more leeway than in previous years; something that really intrigued her. "I'm interested in what audiences can feel when dancers are given time," she says. "We had an extended rehearsal period this year, which isn't always possible for Ailey. Being in the studio with the dancers—teaching, coaching, watching how they move together—that matters. I think people will notice a shift in energy. It feels fresh in the room."

Ironically, Graf Mack's path to leadership was an unlikely one. She grew up knowing she wanted to dance, but running an institution? That was another story. When performing full-time became unsustainable, she turned toward education, earning a master's degree in nonprofit management and teaching at several universities before landing at Juilliard, where she eventually became dean and director of dance.

"That's where I really learned what [this job] requires," she says. "It's not a title. It's how you show up every day. How you listen. How you lift people. How you manage the artistic alongside the administrative. Dance companies today need leaders who understand both. You can't separate creative vision from fundraising, from marketing, from long-term sustainability. They all feed each other."

As Artistic Director of Ailey, Graf Mack remains interested in how the company can expand its reach without losing its identity. Technology, partnerships, and new platforms are part of that conversation, but always in service of the work. "Alvin Ailey leaned into humanity," she says. "That's the through line. The world has changed since his time.

The way we reach people has changed. But the responsibility stays the same. We're here to move people. To tell stories others can't tell. To be brave."

During my interview with Alicia, the most moving moments were when she reflected on her relationship with the late Judith Jaminson—her predecessor, and her north star. As a young girl, Graf Mack had Jamison's image on her wall and later worked under her guidance. Their connection deepened over time, shifting from director to mentor, confidant, and friend.

"She studied everything," she says of Jamison. "How you speak. How you carry yourself. How you prepare a room. She was meticulous and warm and funny and stylish. She didn't rush anything. After she retired, she stayed present in my life. She checked in. She showed up. She believed in me." Graf Mack now occupies Jamison's former office. Much of the furniture remains, and so does the feeling. "I sit at Mr. Ailey's desk," she explains. "That wasn't negotiable. I'm aware of where I am every day. I don't feel pressure. I feel gratitude."

The years of practice, education, and previous roles within Graf Mack's career culminated with the opening night gala, which took place earlier this month. The evening honored board chair Daria L. Wallach, featured performances from Samara Joy and violinist Melissa White, along with boasting a guest list that included notable figures such as Jasmine Guy, Phylicia Rashad, Lorraine Toussaint, and Sunny Hostin, among others. As glamorous a position as the Artistic Director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater may be, for Graf Mack, the goal remains simple.

"I want people to leave the theater feeling lighter," she explains. "Ailey has always done that. You come in carrying whatever the day gave you. You leave feeling like you can face it. That's the work."

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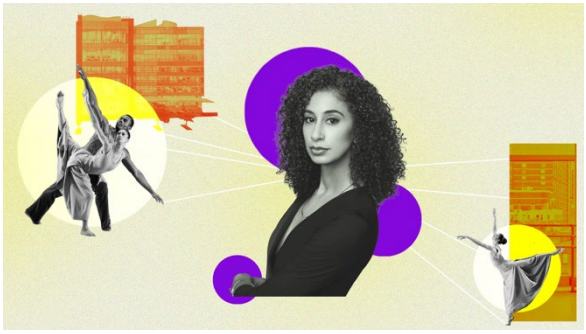
Inc.

How Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Presents a Master Class in Branding

Alicia Graf Mack, the iconic company's new artistic director, is all-in on meeting audiences where they are.

By: Mike Miller

December 11, 2025



Last week, for only the fourth time in its nearly 70-year history, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company began its new season under the leadership of a different Artistic Director: Alicia Graf Mack.

Prior to taking on this role, Graf Mack was the longstanding dean and director of the dance division at The Juilliard School. She had previously collaborated with musical artists such as Beyoncé, John Legend, and Jon Batiste. Before that, she had been a dancer—including a leading dancer—with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. That means she had been well-educated about the philosophies of the company's founder and first artistic director, in addition to having worked under the direct tutelage of both Judith Jamison and Robert Battle, the second and third artistic directors of Ailey. Her roots with the Ailey organization run deep.

In a short-term business world that tends to be focused only on the now, this appointment represents a rarer kind of thinking: It embraces continuity, and long-term thinking, as the best short-term strategy. As Graf Mack said it: "Working here is more than a job. It is part of who I am and what I believe in. So, I am not just here to fulfill my hours.... I am all-in."

Just ahead of the curtain rising on the new season, I had the opportunity to interview Graf Mack about the history she inherited, the future she is building, and the necessity of meeting audiences where they are to meaningfully advance a founder's dream for the next generation.

What are the origins of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company?
Alvin Ailey was a groundbreaking choreographer, performer and dancer. Larger than that, he was also a civil rights and social justice pioneer who utilized modern dance as a way to share human stories across the globe; holding up a mirror to society and showing people how beautiful they are. Mr. Ailey used his artistry to better our world: to bring us all closer together.

Classic ballet tended to celebrate high culture, elitism, fairy tales and princesses. It didn't always connect to the everyday person. Modern dance was a reorientation, or even a rejection, of the norms of classical ballet. Mr. Ailey once famously said, "Dance came from the people and should always be delivered back to the people."

In turn, his work was influenced by the social vernacular of our culture. It reflected some of the social dancing you would find at a speakeasy, or "in the club" as we call it now. It integrated some of the dance you would see on the streets, including jazz dancing which came from various assimilations of African dance and rhythms. It included the way people dance to the blues, and how they dance when they feel the holy ghost or even a sense of spirituality. Mr. Ailey brought the beauty and joy of how real people liked to move to the stage—so that more people could see it, feel it, and receive it back.



New York City is the home of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. But even when we travel abroad, to destinations where we may not share the same language, religion or race—there remains something very powerful about the Ailey aesthetic and Ailey spirit that touches and connects us all. Celebrating our common humanity is central to the ethos of what Mr. Ailey created starting in 1958.



As the newly appointed artistic director, how do you make sure the storied Ailey brand stays vital?
There are some foundational underpinnings of this organization that should never change. Mr. Ailey was entrepreneurial in spirit. He found ways to make dance inclusive to all. He found ways to share the most difficult parts of who we are as people on stage without making audiences feel like they did not want to be there. There is always a resolution, faith and hope, at the end of the experience. When people spend money to come to the theater, he wanted them to leave feeling uplifted. These things will never change.

When Judith Jamison took over as artistic director in 1989, she not only carried on these traditions, but she added operational excellence. She took the company that acted like a small business and evolved it to a large, visible brand. She played a key role in securing an endowment for the now permanent home for the company in the biggest building dedicated to dance in New York City, and one of the biggest in the world. She increased the strength of the Ailey name by adding power and presence to beauty and truth. I was lucky to have worked under her as a dancer.

Robert Battle took over in 2011. He also maintained traditions, but he added to them too. He stretched the repertoire to include other ideas. So, I got to do all the Ailey rep, plus I performed repertory by Ron Brown which is African-infused dance. I performed work by Rennie Harris which is hip-hop-influenced. I performed Ohad Naharin's work from Israel, and Jiří Kylián's work from the Netherlands. All the dancers at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater are amongst the best in the world, and Mr. Battle gave us the chance to perform from across the best work in the world.

This year, I returned to the company as its artistic director. I have a regard for its history. I have a strong sense of its future too. I will nurture what Mr. Ailey, Ms. Jamison and Mr. Battle created. Like the others, I believe stretching is also an important part of growing. Including stretching to meet people where they are living today. We have to better learn how to reach people through social media. We have to tap into streaming media. We have to create collaborations across industries, like music collaborations, to reach more people too. We have to think beyond the stage because the touring model has limitations.

We do not need to change the blueprint, but we need to make sure the blueprint fits the day.

For readers who are newer to the Ailey brand, what is the company's signature work?
The signature piece of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is *Revelations*. If you're new to dance, and if you've never seen any live performance, it's the thing you should see first. *Revelations* will help people to understand how Mr. Ailey was so successful in telling a very specific story in a way that connects us all.



Revelations is a story in three sections. The first section, "Pilgrim of Sorrow," is about coming up from the ground and growing through the struggle. Symbolically, it communicates that even when you continue to be pulled down, there is always hope and faith to look toward. The next section, "Take Me to the Water," is about rebirth. The final section, "Move, Members, Move!" is all about joy and celebration. Celebrating our humanity, celebrating our

connection, and celebrating the resilience of the human spirit. *Revelations* is an autobiographical story about Mr. Ailey's life, but also a universal story that takes audiences through the entire journey we go through as people in the world.



The traditional *Swan Lake* ballet—which has its beauty—is more ethereal and mystical. In contrast, Mr. Ailey's modern *Revelations* feels more real; grounded in genuine human experiences. *Revelations* is the most perfect work of art. No matter what language you speak, or what background you come from, you will feel touched by it. It is not only institution-defining work, but also culturally defining work.

In today's society, driven by high technology, where do the arts and humanities fit in?
I was a history major in college. I have long been interested in humanities, and how history, culture and art are all intertwined. I learned that to really understand a period of time, you should look to the world of the arts—like fashion, literature and, of course, dance.

Recently, the Whitney Museum of American Art curated an exhibit, called "Edges of Ailey," exploring the breadth and context of Mr. Ailey's work. As an observer, you got a genuine sense of how brave it was for Mr. Ailey to highlight underrepresented stories on stage—especially Black stories—and to share them so authentically during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. His work was so rich and enduring because the stories he told were so urgent, and the way he told them was so truthful.

Sadly, in 2025, some of the social tension he worked so hard to diminish has returned. The idea of celebrating identity and diversity in all its forms is being discouraged. The bravery and strength that Mr. Ailey displayed back then is what we hold onto in our art now. When people come see the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and see us continue to highlight underrepresented stories, it is common to hear them say, "Thank you. I needed to see that, because otherwise it feels like our humanity is disappearing right in front of us."

Ailey dancers remain aware that they are cultural ambassadors, and in these complicated times, the role of artists to bring beauty and hope is even more important.

What advice do you have for other leaders working to advance a founder's dream?
I think you have to feel personally connected to the history and future of where an organization is going. It cannot simply be about stepping into a nine to five job. You have to be all in.

There are a lot of sacrifices that being an Artistic Director, and an artist, demands. Being part of the Ailey company requires a lot of touring. It requires sacrificing time with family and, often, the ability to stay in the comfort of your own home. Not only is it a commitment of time, but it is also a physical and spiritual commitment too. My family supports the sacrifices because they know what this means to me.

When I was somewhere around eight years old, a friend who loved dance showed me a VHS tape of an Ailey performance. The choreography featured Donna Wood performing "Cry," which Mr. Ailey created as a present for his mother. I remember how that performance made me feel. I recognized that I loved dance because it could make me feel like that and that, in turn, I could help others to feel like that too. Dance was a superpower. I was hooked. I have loved this company and institution of dance ever since.



Working here is more than a job. It is part of who I am and what I believe in. So, I am not just here to fulfill my hours. I pour every bit of who I am as a person and as an artist into this work. I feel full and blessed to be in this position. I am all-in.

VOGUE

The Curtain Rises for Alicia Graf Mack, Ailey's New Artistic Director

By: Laura Regensdorf
December 2, 2025



On a recent Monday evening at the Manhattan headquarters of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, rehearsal for *Revelations* had the camaraderie of a reunion. A drum set rumbled in the corner. Vocalists settled into their chairs, sheet music and iPads in hand. The late choreographer's canonical 1960 work, set to song-sermons and gospel, is typically performed with live music at the start of the company's annual residency at New York City Center, and the artists were finally back in one room to prepare for opening night on December 3. The musical director cued the spiritual "Wade in the Water"—an evocation of Ailey's boyhood baptism in a church pond in rural Texas—and the dancers began a procession with undulating torsos. "Rocka My Soul" brought out a flurry of yellow rattan fans, in homage to humid Sunday services, which sent a palpable breeze to the observers seated in front-row folding chairs.

Alicia Graf Mack, Ailey's newly appointed artistic director and a twice-former company member, stepped in during a lull to demonstrate the easy fluidity of a head movement. However high the pressure may be for her debut season, Graf Mack, in serendipitous ways, has spent her life preparing for this moment—from her first job at 17 with Dance Theatre of Harlem to her seven-year post directing Juilliard's dance division. The piano trilled, and a soloist began to sing, as if channeling the inner monologue of someone taking the helm of an internationally beloved institution: "I wanna be ready, Lord."



Graf Mack, a statuesque 46-year-old mother of two, joined Ailey in July as only its fourth artistic director in history. The founder himself led the company from its debut in 1958 until his death of AIDS-related complications in 1989. His handpicked successor was Judith Jamison, a magisterial dancer with the troupe from 1965 to 1980, who went on to shape Ailey into an indisputable household name; she choreographed frequently for the company and spearheaded the campaign to build its six-story permanent home on 55th Street and Ninth Avenue. In 2011, Jamison took on an emerita role and handed the reins to Robert Battle, who expanded the roster of dancemakers during his 12-year tenure.



Now, the corner office belongs to Graf Mack. She has brought along her framed *Revelations* fan, a memento from her performing days. And she has made space for a colorful patchwork chaise longue that belonged to Ms. Jamison, who died last fall at age 81. "I would never call her Judi—it would sound odd coming out of my mouth," says Graf Mack, who had a poster of Jamison in her childhood bedroom. Theirs was a relationship of mutual respect, one artist to another: "'You're a divine spirit walker,' she would text me sometimes."

In many ways, Graf Mack's appointment in November 2024, just weeks after Jamison's death, felt ordained. Once again, the company would be guided by a five-foot-ten woman who captivated audiences on the Ailey stage. (A poster from the 2012-2013 season featuring Graf Mack—one leg up in a side-split jump, with a beyond-180-degree extension—no doubt earned a place in a younger generation's bedrooms.) Like Jamison,

Graf Mack had carried the parasol in *Revelations*, a role reserved for a matriarchal figure. And it's an apt metaphor, the umbrella, considering everything Ailey-related that falls under her purview. There's the bonafide company and Ailey II, for early-career dancers; the Ailey School for pre-professional training and a BFA program with Fordham; Ailey Extension classes for the broader community, plus AileyCamp's summer programs around the country for middle schoolers from underserved communities.



"This organization feels rooted in an individual's big dream for art and what it can do," Graf Mack says of Alvin Ailey's extraordinary vision, which honored personal identity and shared experience. As interpreters, Graf Mack shares Jamison's audacious streak, as the rehearsal director Ronni Favors, who arrived at Ailey as a student in 1974, puts it. "They're not afraid to dream big and shoot high, even if their affect is different." She remembers Jamison likening her dancers to B52 bombers—her apartment overlooked the Intrepid, so she'd watch the airplanes come and go with hurtling might—while Graf Mack embodies a knowing reserve.

"The thing that drives everything we do," Favors adds, "is Mr. Ailey's beautiful quote. He said, 'I believe that dance came from the people and that it should always be delivered back to the people.'" Now, with Graf Mack leading the way, the collective goal deepens: "How many different ways can we make good on that promise?"



Graf Mack's own dance life began when she was tiny. Her mother, a Howard professor who also ran a community modeling school in Columbia, Maryland, would tote her along to evening courses; a young Graf Mack, with her coltish long limbs, was soon invited into the neighboring dance class. Ballet became her north star, with rigorous training consuming her free time. "Growing up biracial—just trying to figure out, Who am I and how do I navigate this world?—I had all these images of dancers of color on my walls," she says. When Ailey toured through town, she'd catch them at the Kennedy Center and Baltimore's Lyric Opera House.

At 11, she took a master class with Dance Theatre of Harlem—founded by Arthur Mitchell, the first Black principal at New York City Ballet and a noted protégé of George Balanchine—and the principal dancer Donald Williams signed her shoes with a prophetic note: "Hope to see you at DTH one day." Six years later, she joined the company. Rare as it is to see a woman standing six-foot-four in pointe shoes, Mr. Mitchell never saw Graf Mack's height as disqualifying. "He said, 'We have lots of tall partners for you here,'" she once told PBS. "I never had to fight to feel a sense of belonging. I only had to do the thing that I was hired to do."



A career that began with ease didn't continue that way; injuries related to an underlying rheumatoid condition sidelined Graf Mack after just three years. She studied at Columbia University as a history major, slipping into dance classes at the studio Steps. There, she began taking Horton technique—a reprieve from ballet—with Milton Myers, then a teacher with Ailey. He suggested she meet with Jamison and arranged for her to take class with the company when the tour overlapped with her spring break. "For me, it was like being a tourist," says Graf Mack, who relished the chance to meet an idol but already had a job at JP Morgan lined up for the fall. She spent that summer filling in with the contemporary ballet company Complexions, when the dance legend Carmen de Lavallade—a high school friend of Ailey's, credited with introducing him to Lester Horton's studio in the 1940s—took her aside. The bank job? "'You can do that at any

time in your life,'" Graf Mack remembers her saying. "'But it's clear that you are born to do this and your body is telling you that you can, so you should."

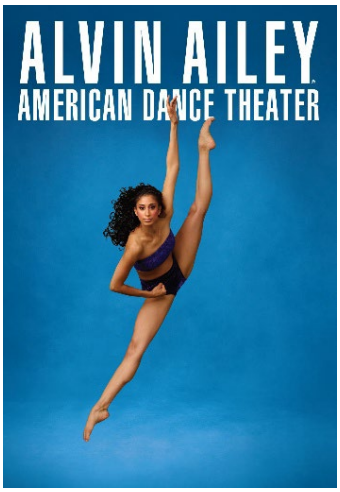


"There have been all these—I call them angels—to point me forward, and they've all been Ailey people," Graf Mack says. She took the advice and rejoined Dance Theatre of Harlem as a principal, though the company shuttered after a year due to financial instability. In 2005, she finally auditioned for Ailey, dancing for three years before injury again crept in. Academia beckoned: She got a master's degree in nonprofit management and began life as a professor. Then, as Jamison was preparing for retirement, she invited Graf Mack and Jamar Roberts to reprise *A Case of You*, her 2004 duet that imagines a couple caught in the sometimes jagged, sometimes tender cycle of love. Robert Battle, the newly named artistic director, convinced Graf Mack to come back for what would be another three-year run—"this time married," she recalls. "Life happens in between."



It isn't always apparent how the sum of one's pursuits will eventually coalesce. In this case, the final piece of this preparatory puzzle was Graf Mack's 2018 appointment as dean and director of Juilliard's dance division. This was a role that demanded institutional savvy and in-the-classroom nuance; she helped with fundraising, tapped visiting choreographers, reframed history courses. As a Black woman with a long performing career, she understood the evolving landscape for working artists. With shrinking numbers of tentpole companies, graduates would need stylistic versatility, with training across a breadth of disciplines; new composition requirements helped prepare dancers to work with choreographers who increasingly build off in-studio improvisations. Old gender norms with ballet went away, allowing students to choose between pointe or allegro tracks. New media courses presaged the shift that would soon come during COVID. Graf Mack's conception of diversity as a thriving ecosystem was all-encompassing—both a reflection of the world as it is and an aspiration for how it could be.

Graf Mack's appointment at Ailey comes at a moment of cross-currents. The recent "Edges of Ailey" exhibition at the Whitney Museum—a monumental, moving project that centered on the impact and influences of the man himself—has recontextualized that household name for new audiences. The show's accompanying performance series, which tapped dancemakers across eras and backgrounds, also underscored Ailey's original big-tent vision. "He didn't want just a company for his own work, but a repertory company to give a platform for other artists to share their stories," says Graf Mack.



At the same time, Ailey's core principles—honoring identity alongside aesthetic achievement—face a shift in political winds. For its Washington, D.C. season early next year, the company will have its two-week run at the historic Warner Theatre, quietly closing a long chapter at the Kennedy Center. Graf Mack has seen the upheaval play out across higher education and arts organizations; she and the Ailey leadership are proceeding with care and integrity. "We follow the founding tenets and then we allow [Mr. Ailey's] bravery to keep us going into the future," she says. Here was a queer Black man barrelling bare-chested into the cultural firmament. "He very much put our stories at the forefront, even when that might not have been widely accepted, but his genius is that he did it in a way that made audience members see themselves onstage, whoever they were, from any background, identity, place around the world."

Highlights on the City Center program reflect this effort to simultaneously root into tradition and break new ground. Maija García's *Jazz Island*, with an original score by the

trumpeter and composer Etienne Charles, is a narrative exploration of Afro-Caribbean folklore created for the full company. García took inspiration from the book Black Gods, Green Islands, by the late Trinidadian artist and dancer Geoffrey Holder; his longtime partner, Carmen de Lavallade—one of those "angels" that helped steer the artistic director back toward dance—called it "a very good meal" after a recent preview.

Graf Mack sees *Jazz Island* in the tradition of Ailey's first work, *Blues Suite* (1958)—each dancer embodying a distinct character—while the company premiere of *Blink of an Eye* is a coolly contemporary addition. Choreographed by Medhi Walerski for eight dancers, it was originally created for Nederlands Dans Theater. "It's not built in the Black aesthetic or cultural narrative language," she says. What makes it Ailey is the "amazing dancing with so much heart and daring." During a rehearsal, Graf Mack let out a yelp when a petite dancer leapt a rather far distance into a pair of waiting arms—an illustration of risk and reward.



For the opening night performance, the Grammy-decorated violinist Melissa White will play for *Blink of an Eye* and the powerhouse vocalist Samara Joy—with five Grammys at just 26, Graf Mack points out—will accompany the newly revived *A Case of You*, in place of Diana Krall's rendition of the Joni Mitchell track. But the first glimpse of the new season arrived ahead of schedule, for the audience Ailey always imagined. On the Friday evening before Thanksgiving, the company's rehearsal for *Revelations* took place in the street-level studio. They opened the shades and piped the music out onto the sidewalk, like a Ninth Avenue take on the holiday windows. "It's amazing to practice these gifts," Graf Mack says, but "the mission is to give dance back to the people."

Celebrating EBONY'S 2025 Power 100 List and Gala

By: Danyale Freeman
September 10, 2025

Uplifting Black voices, experiences, and successes have been at the core of EBONY's legacy for 80 years. This year, as EBONY celebrates eight decades of dedication to the Black community, the 2025 Power 100 List continues that tradition by honoring Black artists, community crusaders, and leaders across industries.

At this year's gala on November 4, 2025, EBONY looks forward to amplifying and celebrating the excellence of each honoree by illuminating the past, honoring the present, and shaping the future.

"The Power 100 is more than a list — it is a blueprint," says EBONY CEO Eden Bridgeman. "EBONY has always been the heartbeat of Black culture, but as we step into our next decade, we are expanding what that means for a new generation. We are building platforms, stories, and opportunities that move Black culture forward globally. These honorees represent the future — leaders who are innovating, creating, and reimagining what's possible. EBONY will continue to be the space where that brilliance is not only seen, but amplified to inspire the world."

Over the years, the EBONY Power 100 has celebrated an impressive roster of trailblazers, including past honorees such as former Vice President Kamala Harris, Academy Award winner Da'Vine Joy Randolph, and global superstar Usher. The 2025 honorees join this esteemed lineage, carrying forward EBONY's commitment to recognizing excellence and influence across every sector.

The full compilation of names on the 2025 Power 100 list is available now at EBONY.com. Check out a few of the awardees below:

Artists In Residence

Alicia Graf Mack, Artistic Director, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater
Derrick Adams, Multidisciplinary Artist
Jonathan Mccrory, Executive Artistic Director, National Black Theatre
Monica Miller, Africana Studies Professor And Department Chair, Barnard College
Monique Rodriguez, Author
Skyler Grey, Street Artist

...



Click here to view Alicia Graf Mack's Artist in Residence profile

Alicia Graf Mack
Artistic Director, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Alicia Graf Mack is no stranger to the spotlight. Still, this one is decidedly bright: She is the second female to step into Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's top artistic role since the legendary Judith Jamison. Appointed Artistic Director in July 2025, Graf Mack became the fourth person to lead the company since its inception in 1958, taking on a mantle that carries an extraordinary history. But Graf Mack is used to breaking barriers. As the youngest and first Black Dean and Director of Juilliard's Dance Division, she transformed one of the world's leading conservatories, championing access, equity and innovation in dance education. A former Ailey star whose performances once lit up the stage, she now guides the institution itself, blending artistry and advocacy to shape a new era for one of America's most iconic modern dance companies.

Condé Nast Traveler

What It’s Like Touring the World as Alvin Ailey’s Lead Dancer | Well Traveled | Condé Nast Traveler

November 19, 2025



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's leading dancer, Constance Stamatiou, joins Condé Nast Traveler to share what it’s really like to perform around the world with one of the most iconic dance companies in history. From dancing beneath the Acropolis in Greece and dancing for Beyoncé, to being barefoot in the Oval Office, experience the world through the eyes of an Alvin Ailey dancer.

Watch here: https://youtu.be/AyfLCEjJ2ls?si=O0UmqabkR8poIYUF (13:48)

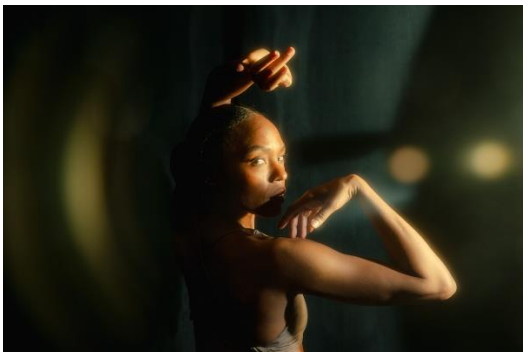
HUFFPOST

Hearing Loss Couldn't Stop Samantha Figgins from Mesmerizing the Masses

"I'm trying to be the person that I needed when I was younger."

By: Rajul Punjabi-Johnson

March 5, 2026



Something about the way the dancers' bodies moved made me feel weak. Not in a "coming down with the flu" way, but instead as if I was suddenly softening like candle wax. I looked around at faces similarly entranced. There was something so vulnerable about how the dancers moved to the music, with an intuition that gently chipped away at the world sitting on our collective shoulders.

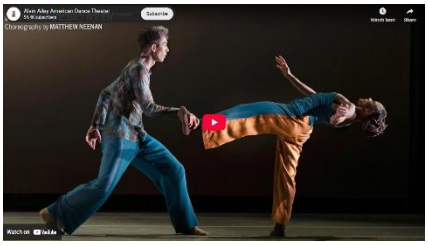
During a December performance in New York, I watched Alvin Ailey dancers perform a piece called "Difference Between," which was all at once energizing and melancholic. I had no idea what the choreography meant to convey — I'm, after all, not a "dance person" — but I was somehow seeing and hearing moments of longing and fear, and later in the piece, a reckoning with a beautiful new beginning.

"We have our ups and our downs as dancers, and we are so lucky and blessed to have work that we can pour ourselves into — that we can use our personal experience to enrich the movement and the story that has already been given to us," says Samantha Figgins, of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and one of the dancers I was watching on stage. "What a gift it is, for us."



Months later, when I got to sit down and chat with Figgins, she agreed that the piece I watched, choreographed by Matthew Neenan, was profoundly emotional. "I think it's a piece about longing, traveling and migration as well — those journeys that we all go through," she says. "There can be a lot of grief there. You might be leaving behind family, relationships, or even a version of yourself."

Figgins, who is hearing impaired, began her dance journey with ballet as a child in Washington, D.C., and learned early how emotions can transfer from the stage into the audience. Recently, she choreographed an integral piece for Ailey's 2025 season titled "Holy Blues," channeling her own feelings about love, loss, grief, and the spirit of Gospel to tell a luminous and haunting story through movement.



In the pieces I watched last winter, Figgins and her castmates became the vehicles for poignant, galvanizing messages about community and resistance. Figgins says it's all intentional; while she's telling a very personal story, she wants to communicate hope and strength. "We're not equipped to be taking in all this information — like global terror — it's a lot on the collective nervous system. And so I think coming to an Ailey performance is an opportunity to let that all go," she tells me.

In the sun-drenched dance studio where Figgins is perched in front of me in deep reflection, it's evident that she is on a journey of being more transparent about her personal life and the way she sees herself. She only just started openly discussing her disability a few years ago — the hearing loss in her right ear is due to a childhood bout of meningitis — and how it has influenced how she works, creates, and sees herself.

There's something revolutionary about seeing disability of any sort as a pillar of your identity, rather than a flaw that requires fixing. Figgins has finally been able to recognize a sense of abundance; how "full," as she describes it, she



is as a person. “There’s something that’s called Deaf Gain. There’s so much that you gain from your deafness and your deaf identity, and I’ve learned so much about how to handle my emotions and the truth of who I am with my hearing journey, that it just has enriched me,” she says.

This butterfly moment brazenly shows up for Figgins both on stage and in her personal life. “It allows other people to show up for me and for me to show up for other people. But it took me a while to get here,” she tells me. “When I was younger, I didn’t want to speak too much about my hearing loss, because as a dancer, everything’s so fast-paced. I didn’t want to show that I have a weakness that might keep the group back.”

As Figgins grew up and gained more professional experience, she wondered how her hearing loss might limit her. And so she carried it all quietly, bent to fit expectations and navigated every space accordingly. “As a Black woman, you work twice as hard — but now I’m working four times as hard to stay on track with what everybody else is,” she says. “I just did not want to highlight my differences in that way, because not a lot of people understand.”



Figgins had a substantial support system, however, in her twin sister, who served as her best friend and interpreter. But at some point, Figgins knew she’d need to fly solo. She describes finally being able to get a hearing aid when she got a salary that included health insurance, and how liberating that was. When she began learning ASL during the pandemic, she saw parallels in the value of intentional movement — whether it be facial cues while signing or a glissade on stage — in conveying a message.

“I feel so much better that I speak more openly about my disability now because I’m not alone in it anymore. It was very isolating,” she says. “I’m [now] trying to make more space for other people like me. I’m trying to be the person that I needed when I was younger.” With freedom and power, Figgins believes, comes crucial responsibility. She’s doing her best to inform her co-workers and artistic staff on how to create more inclusive, accessible spaces for people with differences in ability. And they’ve been very receptive.

Figgins’ shift in perspective has allowed her to focus not only on new dance projects in which she assumes a leadership role, but also on ways she can open her world to young people who’d benefit from embracing the arts. She recalls, not too long ago at Ailey, being part of a re-performance event for kids with disabilities — many were deaf or blind. She and her colleagues hung out with them, brought out costumes for them to see or touch, and even taught them some dance moves.



“It was amazing to see them move, and I was like, ‘There are some artistic geniuses in this group,’” Figgins tells me. “But they’re sometimes left behind. People don’t often think disabled people don’t have much to offer, which is really sad, because [these kids] are so creative. So we need to be more creative with our solutions.” It’s painfully evident, right now, how much we need more creative geniuses than “stable” ones.

Figgins is part of a movement of artists adamantly working to shift the way disability is perceived. This means dismantling the attitudes that led her to constantly quiet a part of herself to grow as an artist.

And it might take a lifetime. But being able to get on stage and melt people into softer versions of themselves while doing it? That’s a gift.

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

By: Martie Bowser
December 30, 2025



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.

This article was also picked up by: Yahoo!

DANCE magazine

Why I Dance

By: Jacquelin Harris
February 2025

whyidance

Jacquelin Harris

Dancer with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater



As a young child, I was enrolled in dance class by my mother, along with my three older sisters, no doubt in an effort to create some peace in her life. Little did she know that she was creating a space for a shy, seemingly invisible child to be herself without fear.

I immediately fell in love with dance and the dance studio. It was a playground for my mind to find patterns and rhythms; I was drawn to the beats and crescendos of music. I lost my first tooth and tied my first shoe at the studio. I knew right away I was meant to be there, although I didn't know it would be forever.

Dance, for me, has always been instinct. My family can attest that when I was younger, if a good song came on, anywhere became my stage—even the aisles of the grocery store or the mall. I couldn't control it and I didn't want to. Now, I channel that instinct to expand my understanding of humanity. In this polarized moment, which at times feels void of compassion, I understand my responsibility to create a space where differences disappear and hearts are able to shine forward. We all have struggles, and we should not look past the emotions that make us uniquely human.

In a time when many of our mentors and shining lights are passing, I am even more empowered by the spirit of dance. Dance has been used to mourn, to celebrate, to honor, to protect, to repent, to bring hope, to transcend fear. I dance as a way to honor our ancestors, to tell stories of people whom, even if I have never met them personally, I have met through history. I am obliged to showcase the power and the possibilities of legends.

I am honored to be able to live and dance in legacy. I am reminded every day how sensitive, eloquent, vulnerable, and strong we are as I witness my co-workers at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. We use our collective power to amplify voices that so often get lost, and to remember the forces that paved the way. ■

"Dance, for me, has always been instinct.... Now, I channel that instinct to expand my understanding of humanity." **Jacquelin Harris**

Dario Calmese, Courtesy Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

ESSENCE

ESSENCE Beauty Diary: Get Ready With Alvin Ailey Dancers Before A Show

By: Akili King
January 16, 2025



At an Alvin Ailey show, you can always expect to be moved by the impeccable musicality, strength, and flexibility from each dancer on the stage.

Although every show has something different to offer, many attend for familiarity and celebrating the legacy of the company. This is, in large part thanks to iconic and spirit-lifting pieces like the 30 minute *Revelations*, created in 1960 to inspire our community to keep their faith in times of triumph, and *Cry*, a piece Mr. Ailey created as an ode to Black motherhood.

The most recent season wasn't without its challenge, though. "It has been different than any season I've experienced," Ailey dancer Constance Stamatiou tells ESSENCE.

"We lost a giant, an icon, a mentor, Artistic Director Emerita Judith Jamison," who hired Stamatiou in 2007. "Grieving for her and carrying on Mr. Ailey's legacy, as she would want, was tough," she adds. "But we also celebrated her, the love and admiration for her was felt. One can only hope to touch as many hearts as she did."



Through the ups and downs, "my favorite part about the work I do is being able to travel the world, sharing my love of dance. Ailey transcends borders and cultures. Every performance is a heartfelt journey that connects me with people," Stamatiou says.

Fellow dancer Corrin Rachelle Mitchell echoes these sentiments. "I get to perform some of the legendary roles that previous Ailey women I greatly admire performed before me," Mitchell—who has been at the company for six years—says. "I get to meet children and hear their response to their introduction to an Ailey performance."



Below, the dancers give us an inside look at the getting ready process ahead of a show: from doing their own hair and makeup to the wellness practices that keep them grounded during touring seasons.

ESSENCE: What is the getting ready process like before a show?

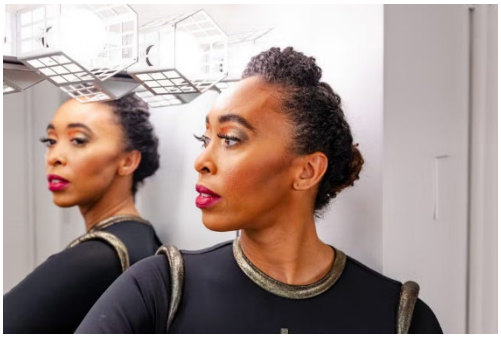
Constance Stamatiou: The getting ready process for me is similar to fueling up like an athlete would— hydrating while vibing to some good music. I like to start slow, do a floor barre, some Pilates to activate muscles, and end with a ballet class.

I take moments to think about what my intentions are for the performance, my corrections, etc. I give myself a pep talk and or meditate—especially on days when I feel more exhausted than usual. I get into character, I put on my costume and hope the audience connects with me. I want to stay open to challenges and stay present. I never want to become complacent.

My least favorite part is messing up on stage. That's been a lesson that's taken me a minute to not let defeat me. I can do a thousand steps right, mess up on one and dwell on that and think I wasn't good enough. I'm human and realize that sometimes great things come from mistakes. We can't expect every performance to be the same nor should you want it to be—that would be boring.



Corrin Rachelle Mitchell: For me, the getting ready process can vary depending on what the performance program is but it always includes me listening to music. I love music and it helps me set my intentions for the upcoming performance. I've developed a character for every role I perform so I use different music to help me activate before I even put my costume on.

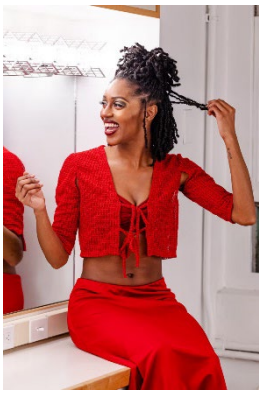


My absolute favorite part about getting ready for performances is when I get to wear my own individual hairstyle. I love expressing myself through my hair so when I don't have to wear the traditional bun, I get creative with my look. Eyelashes are the worst part of my getting ready process. I struggle with the application process, so I always dread that part of my makeup routine.

What are the go-to beauty products you use when getting ready to perform?

CS: My go-to product for my hair is Fenty HomeCurl Cream. It smells so good and keeps my curls hydrated. ECO gel to slick back my hair into a bun. My go-to makeup products are from Elf. I love the coverage, the pigments, and the prices!

CRM: My go-to products for my hair are a homemade blend of essential oils and water that I spray all through my scalp between hair changes. I'm currently in the early stages of my loc journey so it's my favorite way to ensure my hair stays healthy with all the manipulation of repetitive hair changes.



As for my makeup, my favorite part is elevating my look with colorful HANDAIYAN liquid eyeliner and my favorite red lip, the Maybelline Super Stay Matte Lipstick. Those products work well for my long performances since they're long lasting and waterproof.

Any beauty techniques you rely on when getting ready?



CS: I like to wet my sponge to apply foundation to the back of my hand, dab my sponge and apply to my face. It gives just the right amount of coverage plus I'm not buying as frequently. Setting spray is a must especially on two performance days. For my hair, water and conditioner are my best friends. My curls respond better when my hair is saturated with water, it seals in the conditioner better. I use a microfiber towel to scrunch my curls to keep the frizz away.

CRM: A beauty technique I rely on when performing are my highlight and contour placements. It's important the audience can make out the features on my face when on stage so my stage contour is different from my street beat. I like to use highlighter underneath my eyebrows above my eyeshadow.

What are some wellness practices that keep you balanced during the season?

CS: One of the wellness practices that I do during the season is strength training. I'm not able to go to the gym as often as I would during rehearsal time so I do Pilates mat to maintain my strength. I'm more on the flexible side so balancing out

strength training helps prevent injury. When my body is feeling tight I take the time to stretch and breathe to lengthen the muscles.



When I get home, Epsom salt baths are extremely important. On days I'm not performing, I like to get a massage. We also have physical therapists who I make sure to see when things are feeling a little off, they're very good about giving rehabilitation exercises. Right now I'm dealing with a sprained second toe and bursitis so soaking my foot in ice after the performance is a must. Then, on Mondays, which is my day off, I spend as much time with my family and get in as many hugs as I possibly can.



CRM: I enjoy crocheting, walking around the theater and singing for everyone in the Company. I go for walks between rehearsals and performances to give myself fresh air and a change of scenery. I also practice meditation and square breathing for my mental wellness.

encore

Alvin Ailey's Christopher R. Wilson Hopes To Be "Superhero" to Young Audience Members

By: Keith Loria
January 27, 2025



Christopher R. Wilson, who discovered a love of dance while growing up in Augusta, is thrilled to be performing at the Fox Theatre with The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

It's the continuation of a dream that started when Wilson was just 11, and saw the dance company perform at the Fox—his first time ever at the venue.

"I went with my mom and one of her really good friends, and I remember vividly, two pieces for sure," he said. "One was the *Golden Section* by Twyla Tharp, which really stood out because everyone is decked in gold—legwarmers, biker shorts, jazz shoes—and they looked like superheroes working out. They were running, jumping and lifting each other all across the stage. Being 11, that naturally stood out to me. And then *Revelations* closed the program. No matter how old you are, this speaks to you in some sort of way."

At the time, dance was just one of his many interests; he also played basketball, practiced the cello and was taking golf lessons.

"It was really just a hobby and an after-school thing I did," Wilson said. "My mom said I should probably narrow it down a little bit, and I chose to stick with dance, and a lot had to do with seeing the Ailey company. I knew I liked doing it and it was a lot of fun."

"You Can Go Far"

Wilson attended a performing arts school for high school and became much more serious about his craft. Ultimately, he had to let go of the cello to make more time for more dance classes.

"I took as many classes as I could and eventually found a local studio in my hometown and attended a couple of summer programs, and decided I wanted to pursue this professionally," he said. "I was really inspired by my teacher, Dawn Axam, and she sat me down and had a real conversation with me. She told me, 'You have the ability to do this and you can go far with this dream, but it's on you if you're going to be serious about it.' After doing some thinking in my 16-year-old brain, I decided it was what I wanted to do."

Wilson is a cum laude graduate of the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program in Dance and officially joined the company for the 2018 Lincoln Center season. His training also includes stints at Colton Ballet School, Alonzo King LINES Ballet and The School at Jacob's Pillow.

"I chose this route because Ailey was always the dream, plus I would get to be in the middle of New York City," Wilson said.

The Full-Circle Moment

Over his career, Wilson has performed as a guest artist with The Black Iris Project, at The World Monument Fund's Hadrian Gala honoring Queen Sofía of Spain, and the 2017 Essence Festival in New Orleans.

"There are a lot of things that I enjoy about this career," he said. "One is getting to be the superhero that I saw for someone else. I love seeing young people after a performance and seeing how energized they are. I remember that

feeling and having that same response after seeing Ailey. That lets me know I've done what I was supposed to do. That's what Mr. Ailey was all about."

Plus, being part of a touring dance company is a dream, as Wilson is passionate about traveling.

"I just love going all over the world; I love seeing new places, doing new things and trying new foods," he said. "It is hard work and there's a lot of balance with the physical demands of the job, but it's something I just really enjoy."

Thanks to his dancing, Wilson has performed at the Fox Theatre numerous times, but he's always thrilled to be back on the stage and relive the full-circle moment.

"The Fox is one of the biggest houses we perform in, and for my 11-year-old self, this was like a castle," he said. "I remember roughly where I sat, and every time I go, I like to walk over to that area, take a second, and remember that it wasn't too long ago I was sitting there and now I get to the one on stage inspiring others. I'm excited to be back and look forward to coming back for years to come."

The Next Generation

While home, he's looking forward to some good, authentic Southern food and seeing friends and family.

Wilson has no plans to stop with Ailey but does envision one day coming back to Augusta to help the next generation of dancers.

"Right now, the idea is to open a dance studio in my hometown and just breed the talent that I know has always been there," he said. "Sometimes, that talent may go untapped or unrealized, and I just want to come in and give people the option and send them off to follow their dream."

THE CUT

How Alvin Ailey Dancer Constance Stamatiou Gets It Done

By: Brittney Oliver
December 18, 2023



Constance Stamatiou started dancing when she was 5. The Charlotte, North Carolina, native knew at a young age that she wanted to entertain and live in New York City and that dancing could be the catalyst for a career in the spotlight. At 18, she attended the Ailey School, an extensive dance training program, as a fellowship student. She then moved to the Big Apple and joined Ailey II, a junior ensemble for early career dancers. Stamatiou joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 2007 and now, in her 12th season with the company, is living out her dreams as a lead dancer and the face of the company's 2023–24 season.

The 39-year-old trains each day to be less prone to injury and keep her stamina over an eight-month-long season of performing. She doesn't feel the need to keep up with the 20-somethings in the industry as the dancing world is evolving, but she's keenly aware of how her own body has changed. She left the company in 2011 to start her family, returning five years later. "When I was younger, it was rare to see a dancer or hear of a dancer who was past their 20s, especially one who has kids," she said. Being a parent and being older was a career ender at the time, but Stamatiou always felt that Alvin Ailey was an exception that embraced older dancers.

Stamatiou takes pride in being a veteran in the dance company. It was overwhelming to figure out how to show up as a mother and wife, retrain her new body for dancing, and maintain her schedule while finding personal time. But she's feeling better about the work she's doing on herself, and it's showing up in her personal and professional life in a big way. "I feel like a leading lady. I'm not trying to mimic other dancers anymore. I feel like I've stepped into my own," she said. Stamatiou lives in New Jersey with her husband and two children. Here's how she gets it done.

On her morning routine:
I wake up at 7 a.m. and usually get the kids up by 7:15. I typically go to Starbucks for breakfast and get a quick egg bite and a croissant. Sometimes, I eat a Spartan Meal Prep that my husband gets, which helps me because I don't have to go out to get food. I'll have oatmeal that's already prepared. Once I drop off the kids, my husband will drop me off at the George Washington Bridge. I can catch a transit bus across and then catch the A train. The commute is all right as long as there's no accident. I can get to work in 30 minutes.

Usually, once I get to Alvin Ailey, I grab the free AM New York newspaper and do the crossword puzzles. After that, I start to warm up. I try to roll out, stretch, and release my muscles. Then, I do a little conditioning to get the muscles awakened again by doing the floor bar, floor pilates, and some Gyrokinesis before the company's ballet class.

On returning to professional dancing after having children:
I was a newlywed, and my husband and I wanted to have kids when I left. During that time, I was missing Ailey. I was still dancing and teaching here and there, but it just felt like something was missing. My heart kept wanting Mr. Ailey's work. It has so much meaning, so much it was therapeutic. That's when my journey to the gym started because, for one, you've got to get your body back after having two kids. It's not the same. Secondly, I'm now in my 30s.

On her exercise routine:
After rehearsal, I will go catch a class for strength training. I'm lifting weights and paying each part of my body some attention. Strength training is excellent for engaging my core and allowing me to balance more. I do a lot of cardio,

especially for dances like Mr. Ailey's Cry. It is a 16-minute solo, and you're on the stage by yourself the entire time. It does not get any easier as you go toward the end. The pace is being brought up and so is your energy. Cardio is essential to build my stamina. If I don't feel like going to the gym, I go to tae kwon do practice. I took an interest in it when I signed my kids up for classes.

On how she unwinds for the day:
If my day is intense and I'm coming home and feel like I can't walk, I'm in the tub with Epsom salt. I also enjoy having quality time with my family because, by the time I wake them up and send them to school, I don't see them until it's time to go to bed. We like to watch TV together as a family or as a couple. The kids are into Goosebumps, and my husband and I watch Loot on Apple TV+ and Black Cake on Hulu.

On how she manages stress:
I grew up disassociating and just not feeling feelings. I saw it was taking a toll on my body, especially with this kind of demanding schedule. I remember there was a period on tour when many feelings were coming to the surface, and I didn't know how to deal with them. It was great to have a bond with other dancers where I could feel vulnerable enough to vent about my feelings. I was encouraged to start therapy, and I've been speaking with my therapist now for about two years. It's been life-changing and life-saving. It's helped me deal with my feelings and honor myself. I do that once a week, even when I'm on tour. Luckily, I can speak to my therapist through Zoom.

On being a parent with a demanding schedule:
My husband had to play Mom and Dad a lot. Luckily, we have FaceTime. I was able to buy books and read to my kids through FaceTime when they were younger. Nowadays, I'm trying to help with homework through FaceTime. It's challenging. My husband knew this was my passion. He also sensed something missing when I wasn't at Ailey. He and I both said we felt that me dancing again made me a better mom. And, of course, my being a mom made me a better dancer. It was really important to me for the kids to see that childhood dreams can come true. As much as I would go through the guilt of being away for so long, I kept trying to remind myself, They see you do something you love and are proud of you.

On the moment she felt she'd "made it":
I was about 20 years old when I got into the company, so I mimicked what the other dancers were doing and did what I was told, being that good girl and just listening. When I left and returned, I was looking for that same thing. Okay, are you gonna tell me what to do? But now Alvin Ailey's under a new direction, and it's a whole new company. I'm one of the oldest dancers, so I have to be able to do it for myself. It finally paid off this year when they told me I was the featured dancer for this year's poster. I've been here for so long; this is the first time I have been honored on a poster. I wasn't expecting it at all.

On advice she would offer her younger self:
To be more confident in myself and my body. Young dancers end up comparing themselves: This person has better feet, or this person can turn more than I can. We start picking away at ourselves and chipping away at our confidence. That shows in your dance, and you try to hide instead of being vulnerable. I remember being young and my peers had so many opinions about how I should hold my body and move. You end up losing awareness of your own body. But no one can tell you how to move your body because all of our bodies are different. That's the investigation you must do for yourself, and I wish I had been more independent, stronger, and confident to do that earlier. The investigation should never stop, so even if I felt like I made it, I have to continue to study and continue to experiment because who knows how far this body can go?

On the people who help her get it done:
My husband first, and then my kids because they drive me to strive for greatness. I do it for them because I want to be an example. Regarding my time at Ailey, my first director, Ms. Judith Jamison, is a legend. When she comes into the room, everybody pulls up. Then my assistant director, Matthew Rushing, and rehearsal director, Ronni Favors: Matthew helped guide me into the discipline I have now and into becoming a lead dancer; Ronni has seen me grow, and sometimes I look to her when I need a shoulder to cry on and a therapy session.

The New York Times

Ailey's New Secret Weapon: The Heroically Unmannered James Gilmer

By: Gia Kourlas

December 13, 2021

Arts
The New York Times



NATE PALMER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Bringing His Own Drama Onstage

Alvin Ailey's new secret weapon is the heroically unmannered James Gilmer.

By GIA KOURLAS

December is never a breeze for an Alvin Ailey dancer, but recently — amid rehearsals and with a performance looming that evening — James Gilmer found himself in an empty closet on the studio side of New York City Center. Armed with a late lunch, he was using his only break of the day for an interview. But as he sees it, it's better not to waste time.

Omicron is not just looming. It's here. Even Gilmer's plans to attend a dance performance just after Thanksgiving were thwarted: Complexions canceled the second half of its season at the Joyce Theater after breakthrough cases of Covid-19 were detected among the dancers. So when it comes to his position at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Gilmer has perspective.

"I'm continuing to be very cautious, and I'm not letting any day pass without remembering that it's such a gift," he said. "As much as it's an opportunity and a privilege to perform onstage already, it's even more so now."

Gilmer, 28, a member of Ailey since June 2019, has reason to feel both grateful and a little hesitant. After he joined the company — it took him two auditions — he moved to Harlem from San Francisco, where he had been performing with ODC/Dance and Amy Seiwert's Imagery. He settled into "Revelations" after learning the Ailey masterwork from the veteran dancer and associate artistic director, Matthew Rushing. ("An incredibly dear experience," Gilmer

CONTINUED ON PAGE C5

James Gilmer, at the Ailey studios on West 55th Street, is "really nimble in all senses of the word," a colleague says.

Bringing His Own Drama Onstage

CONTINUED FROM PAGE C1

said.) He went on an international tour with the company, and finished his first season at City Center. But then the pandemic hit.

What was it like to finally get the job and then have to go into lockdown? Gilmer still might have been getting his bearings, but it was clear from the start that he was a standout.

Stuck at home, unable to perform, he did a lot of yoga, which he had become devoted to while living in California. "To feel like my body was my own," he said, "I really needed to center using that practice."

But Gilmer's first serious dance language was ballet. Somewhat unusually for an Ailey dancer, he had an impressive career before he arrived at the company. Classically trained from an early age — he studied in his hometown, at Pittsburgh Ballet Theater School — Gilmer spent six seasons with Cincinnati Ballet, where he attained the rank of soloist.

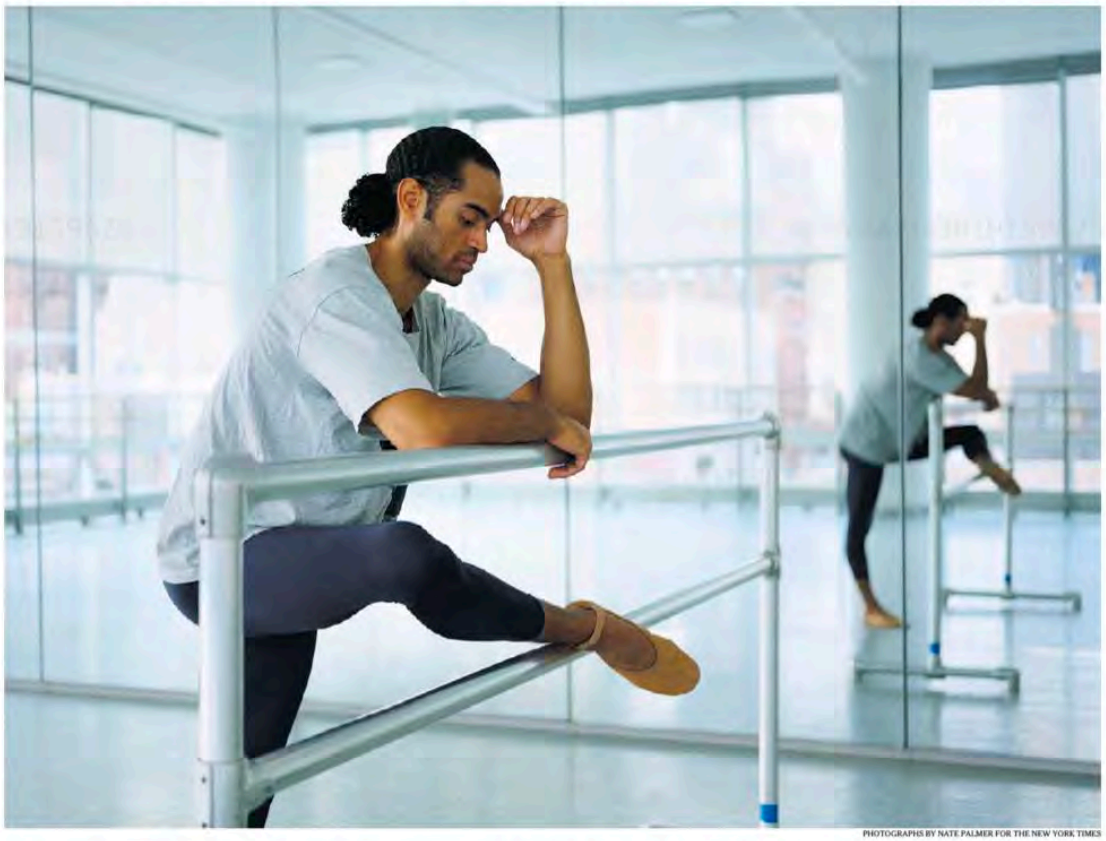
A strong partner who, at 6 feet 2, fills the stage with a special kind of grandeur, Gilmer is almost heroically unmannered — his dancing has an ease, a looseness that can be rare in ballet dancers. Robert Battle, Ailey's artistic director, recalled being struck by his size and agility, along with his versatility.

"I remember asking a friend of mine in California, 'What's he like?' And it was, 'Oh, he's no drama, he's easygoing, but really gifted.'"

Battle admires Gilmer's noble bearing and what he called "a genuine heart."

"He's really nimble in all senses of the word," he added, "which is usually just meaning flexible. But I mean something a little more soulful: He's not a peacock, you know? He's very much about the work and about giving himself over to the work in such a wonderful and beautiful way."

Gilmer *could* be a peacock: With his elegant carriage and line, and his scrupulous technique, he could veer toward a more aloof place as a performer — or be a showoff. "He has a wonderful economy with how he shows his colors — his feathers if you will," Battle said. "He's able to meet the challenges of the different choreographers that come in because he's so open."



PHOTOGRAPHS BY NATE PALMER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



'Even when I started focusing on ballet, there was a part of me that always wanted Ailey.'
JAMES GILMER



James Gilmer loosening up in a dance studio at Alvin Ailey. He said that his parents signed him up for dance classes because he was always moving. Now, he sees his role as an Ailey dancer who is able to convey a story.

Battle was struck when coaching him in Azure Barton's "Busk" with how Gilmer listened. "His whole body is an ear," Battle said. "You get an immediate response to what it is you're asking him to do. And that may seem simple, but believe me, it isn't."

Gilmer first saw the Ailey company perform when he was around 9 or 10. He was always a fan. "Even when I started focusing on ballet, there was a part of me that always wanted Ailey and always kind of dreamed of Ailey," he said.

For Gilmer, being an Ailey dancer has to do with being able to convey a story, something he said he has wanted to do onstage his whole life. Finding the drama — and his own personal drama — within a classic Ailey role is not the same thing as being a prince in ballet.

While in Cincinnati, Gilmer performed in works by George Balanchine and contemporary choreographers, as well as dancing leading classical parts in "Cinderella," "The Nutcracker" and "Romeo and Juliet." (He played Tybalt. "Dying onstage," he said, flashing a quick grin. "So fun.")

When he left to dance in California, he hadn't planned on abandoning ballet entirely. But he wanted to transition out of a company that was so focused on full-length story ballets. "With their usual narratives and characterizations, although fun to perform," he said, "I was left feeling unseen and somewhat unexpressed as a person and artist."

Gilmer wanted more than "tights-and-a-tunic kind of roles," he said. "I could also feel myself being pulled to find a place where there were more bodies like mine, not just Black but long limbed, athletic, versatile dancer bodies."

He loved working for Victoria Morgan, Cincinnati Ballet's artistic director, calling her "a very visionary type of a boss." He loves working with women in general, he said, including Twyla Tharp, who cast him in the premiere of "Second Duet" opposite Jacquelin Harris, also of Ailey, for her "Twyla Now" program at City Center. During the working process — it was extensive — Tharp told him to train like a boxer.

What did that mean? "Footwork," he said. "Having a sense of lightness on the floor. It's being able to move in any direction and how that correlates to your core and where things are releasing and also inhabiting your body onstage. Being able to just be in your bones and muscles. And *that's* the performance."

Is that why his feet were especially lithe and lively in "Lazarus," a hip-hop work by Rennie Harris, this season? He was so grounded, so relaxed despite, at times, the choreography's breakneck speed. Yet Gilmer's performance, particularly in the dance's more dramatic moments, wasn't exterior, but interior: private, resolute, haunting.

That may have had something to do with Tharp, too, who coached him in both his dancing and his acting. "To learn from someone of that caliber after so much time away from dance was really satisfying that huge void and that urgency to create and to get moving again," Gilmer said. "I've been able to really take that and run with it with everything. There are obviously certain ways of training, but there's so much that she made me realize that I can take into any dancing space and really transform the way that I perform."

He laughed. "She's so cool," he said. "I hope that that wasn't it." (It likely won't be; at the very least, Battle plans on bringing "Second Duet" into the Ailey repertory.)

In thinking about why dance became such an important part of his life — Gilmer said his parents signed him up for classes because he was always moving — he considers his upper-middle-class upbringing and how much privilege goes into becoming a professional dancer. "When you have two parents as a Black person, and you're able to grow up in a Victorian-style home with your own bedroom and a living room and a second floor and a third floor and having the availability to move around," he said. "Like physically move my body through space and run up and down stairs. And the yard: having a front yard, having a backyard."

He grew up, essentially, in a world of space, and that gave him a restless spirit: "I feel it generating within me," he said. "It always drew me back to the studio."

As a dancer, Gilmer wants to share it, to be, like the women he's worked with, as generous as possible. "It also almost elevates the responsibility because I've been given so incredibly much," he said. "So to give it back to the audience in that way is really all I ever intend to do."

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Canadian dancer looks to inspire the next generation

By: Robyn Grant-Moran

January 28, 2023 *(Online 1/27/23)*

Canadian dancer looks to inspire the next generation

Ontarian Hannah Alissa Richardson returns to Toronto with the theatre that made her feel seen as a racialized performer

ROBYN GRANT-MORAN



Hannah Alissa Richardson, seen performing in Francesca Harper's Freedom Series, has been dancing since she was three years old. She will be the sole Canadian performer in her inaugural season with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater when it visits Toronto in early February. ERIN BAIANO

Hannah Alissa Richardson first saw the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at Toronto's Meridian Hall at 12 years old, 12 years ago. Dancing since age three, and already active in the competitive circuit, Richardson had never seen so many BIPOC dancers on stage at once. Born to Trinidadian and Filipino parents and growing up in Vaughan, Ont., Richardson says prior to that night, "I was used to being the only person of colour on stage, I thought that was just normal."

When Alvin Ailey returns to Toronto's Meridian Hall this February, Richardson won't be there in the audience – she'll be on stage as the sole Canadian in her inaugural season with the company.

Alvin Ailey (1931-1989) created his eponymous company in 1958 to preserve and celebrate African-American dance and culture. Since its genesis, the New York-based company has enriched and expanded the definitions of modern American dance as a whole, inspiring and eventually training generations of dancers with the establishment of what is now the Ailey School.

Seeing works by Ailey and the best contemporary African-American choreographers and dancers in the company was nothing short of life changing for the young Richardson. On a phone call from New York between costume fittings and rehearsals, she chokes up as she relives the joy she experienced seeing the company on stage, and the pride in now being one of it dancers, perhaps inspiring the next generation.

Not long after that fateful night, Richardson auditioned for a summer intensive program at the Ailey School. She was accepted, though her competition schedule would not permit her to attend until she was 14. "It was my first time really leaving Canada and travelling," says Richardson, recounting that month in New York, where she now spends plenty of time. "My parents traded weekends to come stay with me."

After finishing high school, Richardson joined the prestigious full-time program at the Ailey School, graduating with honours in 2019. Richardson then danced with Ailey II, the bridging program for dancers between school and a company position.

It was there where rehearsal director Ronni Favors gave Richardson and classmates a powerful bit of advice: "Be a sponge" when it comes to learning. "Absorb all the information."

Richardson continues, "Not only from the people in the front of the room but from your co-workers, peers that you're dancing beside. Absorb information from outside of the elite; from students' shows, plays and commercials, because there's always something to learn. Grab a little something from everybody and put it in your toolbox to use for the future." It's a teaching that Richardson still abides by, committed to continuously learning and improving.

The current show's Saturday evening bill includes Ailey and Mary Barnett's *Survivors*, a tribute to Nelson and Winnie Mandela, Ailey's seminal work *Revelations* and MacArthur Fellow Kyle Abraham's *Are You in Your Feelings?* Richardson describes Abraham's 32-minute work as a mixtape that elevates and celebrates, featuring the music of Kendrick Lamar, Erykah Badu, Maxwell and Drake to name a few. The pairing of contemporary dance with modern-day R&B, hip-hop and soul music is what makes this piece so exciting for Richardson. "Just seeing the two go hand in hand, it's really beautiful, really fun and really entertaining to watch."

This full circle moment in Richardson's career comes in part thanks to the "village" that supported her: her parents, brothers, friends, boyfriend. "You can do it by yourself, but what's the point of being successful with no one to share it with?"

Richardson's final words of advice to aspiring dancers in the audience where she was 12 years ago: Just because the professionals make it look effortless, it isn't. "Not everything's going to be easy, the challenges are great … to get to where you want to be, you've got to fall in love with hard work, and don't give up."

Special to The Globe and Mail

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is returning to Toronto's Meridian Hall Feb. 3 and 4.

The New York Times

[Spotlight Gets Brighter For an Ailey Dancer]

By: Siobhan Burke

December 9, 2022 *(Online: 12/7/22)*

Spotlight Gets Brighter For an Ailey Dancer

Jacquelin Harris is expanding her repertoire, with role debuts in store for the latest season.

By SIOBHAN BURKE

During a recent free hour after her morning class, before afternoon rehearsals and an evening performance, the dancer Jacquelin Harris was brushing up on some familiar material. It was the third day of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's season at New York City Center, 27 shows in three and a half weeks — a marathon, as always, for the troupe's 31 dancers.

Harris, who joined the company in 2014, had been expecting to perform in Alvin Ailey's "Pas de Duke" — originally a star vehicle for Judith Jamison and Mikhail Baryshnikov — in mid-December. But she had been summoned into the role earlier to replace an injured colleague.

Fortunately, she already knew it inside and out. To the effervescent horns of the Duke Ellington music, she swept across a City Center studio with bladelike leaping turns. As if buoyed by a gust of air, her body sprang into a layout, one leg kicking up as her torso arched back ecstatically. When Matthew Rushing, Ailey's associate artistic director, asked her to repeat one step, she anticipated his feedback, applying it before he even said it out loud.

"You took my note; you knew the note!" Rushing said, and they both burst into laughter. He offered a few other suggestions by way of fine-tuning, or, as he put it, "I'm being petty because it's so great." The coaching session ended 20 minutes early.

At 30, and with a decade of Ailey experience behind her, Harris has emerged as a quietly confident, eminently capable star

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NATE PALMER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jacquelin Harris joined Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 2014.

Spotlight Gets Brighter For an Ailey Dancer

CONTINUED FROM PAGE C1

among the company's current roster, a dancer of transfixing technical ability and ever-deepening expressive range. She is as grounded as she is electrifying, whether shape-shifting under a disco ball in Azure Barton's "Busk" or leading the solemn, prayerful opening section of the classic "Revelations."

"She's a little bit unflappable," Robert Battle, the Ailey company's artistic director, said in an interview. "I used to say: 'Does she know how to get tired? Run out of breath onstage?' It's amazing, it really is."

He recalled seeing Harris years ago in Ailey II, where she was a member before joining the main company, "and immediately gravitating to her energy, her vibe — her sense of seeming carefree, yet like a missile," he said. "She's direct in the movement. You know exactly what she wants you to see, and that takes a lot of control. She's a natural."

This season, Harris expands her repertoire with several new roles. Her current schedule includes debuts in Twyla Tharp's exuberant "Roy's Joys," a company premiere opening on Friday; Kyle Abraham's "Are You in Your Feelings?," a new piece fueled by a hip-hop, soul and R&B playlist; and Paul Taylor's pared-down "Duet." If you've seen Ailey ads around town, you might recognize Harris as this year's poster girl, gesturing skyward and wrapped in gold.

But her steady, ready-for-anything disposition has also taken her beyond the Ailey fold. Over the past few years, she has been a standout in projects of the Merce Cunningham Trust — most notably "Night of 100 Solos," the multicity event honoring what would have been Cunningham's 100th birthday — and in two programs of Tharp's choreography at City Center, as part of a cast of ballet and modern-dance luminaries handpicked by Tharp.

"She's one of the finest dancers in New York right now," said Patricia Lent, the Cunningham Trust's licensing director, who worked closely with Harris in preparation for "Night of 100 Solos." That was Harris's first journey into Cunningham's convoluted movement, but you wouldn't have known it, Lent said: "She inhabited the work like it was just waiting for her."

"She does everything accurately and clearly — she does what she's taught to do," Lent added. "But then she finds places within the work to push it and extend it, in a way that people who have worked with Merce for a very long time have learned to do."



NATE PALMER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



PAUL KOLNIK

Left, Jacquelin Harris, the literal poster girl for the Ailey dance company. Below left, from left, Harris with James Gilmer and Chalvar Monteiro in "Roy's Joys."

To an extent, Harris, who has a reserved but assured demeanor, recognizes a certain facility within herself: the effortlessness that some of her colleagues speak of. In an interview at the Ailey headquarters in Midtown, between rehearsal sessions, she reflected on the perception that she easily picks up new material.

"I feel like my body can naturally do" — she said before pausing to consider her words, placing both hands on her torso and smiling, as if in gratitude. "My body holds me down."

Harris, who is from Charlotte, N.C., took her first dance class when she was just 2. She trained for competitions (and for fun) at a local studio, Dance Productions, then moved to New York to study in the joint Bachelor of Fine Arts program between the Ailey School and Fordham University.

Adept with numbers, she began pursuing a double major in dance and mathematics. Her touring schedule with Ailey II, which she joined in her senior year, prevented her from completing all the courses for her math degree. But, Battle said, her numerical inclinations still show up in the studio, especially when it comes to deciphering complex music.

"She has this wonderful mathematical mind, and I think she applies that as she receives information," Battle said. "You watch her figure it out, almost like a Rubik's cube." When she's presented with an unpredictable rhythmic pattern, he said, "her eyes light up." (During the depths of the pandemic, Harris passed the time taking a free online course about quantum physics, she said; she also loves a good jigsaw puzzle.)

More challenging for Harris is what she called "an element of character work that we do a lot here, where you have to pull something outside of yourself and bring it into the work, to take it to that next level." Mining that kind of motivation, she said, "to the point where it projects onstage, and shows through my body — that takes more exploration, which keeps it interesting."

If anyone can stretch a dancer of unassailable skill to new heights, it's the exacting Tharp. "I love working with Twyla," Harris said. "If everything permits, I'll work for her as many times as she calls me."

In both of her projects with Tharp outside the Ailey company, Harris has performed with her fellow Ailey dancer James Gilmer: last year in "Second Duet," a work of uncompromising physical demands and mutually heroic partnering, and this year in the scintillating "Softly as I Leave You," from "Nine Sinatra Songs," which also requires extreme trust between partners.

As Harris's other half in these works, Gilmer has been drawn to her fearlessness onstage, "the abandonment in her dancing," he said. In "Softly," which the two reprised at the Ailey gala this year, "she just goes for it every time and trusts me so much. We rock it out, and it's really fun."

Harris is now in the process of learning Ailey's celebrated "Cry," a solo that's something of a rite of passage for women in the company, dedicated to "all Black women everywhere — especially our mothers." And while she doesn't plan to retire anytime soon, she is laying the groundwork for when that day comes. In January, she'll begin remote courses in a program of Columbia University's nursing school, which offers prerequisites for degrees in various health professions.

Still, she's staying curious and open about where her path could lead.

"Maybe I'll start learning microbiology," she said, "and decide I want to go do something completely different."

DANCE SPIRIT

Feeling the Beat

By: Courtney Celeste Spears

May/June 2019 Issue



Samantha Figgins

FEELING *the Beat*

As told to Courtney Celeste Spears

How Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Samantha Figgins' hearing loss has affected her dancing

Samantha Figgins is currently in her fifth season with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (and was a Dance Spirit *cover girl back in 2013!). But what many people don't know is that the gorgeous dancer suffers from single-sided deafness. As a baby, Figgins contracted spinal meningitis, which caused her to lose all hearing in her right ear. She never gave up on her dance dreams, though, and fought her way through uncomfortable situations, never missing an opportunity to learn and grow. Now, after getting her first pair of hearing aids, she opens up about her path to success. —*Courtney Celeste Spears

I come from an artistic family: I'm one of four girls, and all of us (including my twin sister, Jenelle) are dancers. While we were growing up in DC, my mother put my oldest sister in dance first, but I eventually fell in love with it, too. I studied at Duke Ellington School of the Arts and later attended SUNY Purchase Conservatory. I danced and toured with Complexions Contemporary Ballet for four years, before joining Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. I'm filled with so much joy and gratitude to be where I am, especially now, as I'm able to reflect back on my journey, and the work it took to overcome a disability that could've held me back from my dreams.

When I was 10 months old, I had spinal meningitis, which put me in the hospital for 10 weeks and caused me to lose all hearing in my right ear. Ever since, I've lived with single-sided deafness, which in time turned into auditory processing disorder (APD)—when the brain has difficulty processing speech.



Samantha (in red) with her twin sister, Jenelle, in sixth grade



Performing at the Kennedy Center in high school during her residency with Dance Theatre of Harlem

It was hard growing up with single-sided deafness. I found myself not fully invested in conversations because I couldn't understand what was being said. It made me more of an introvert, because it was exhausting trying to play catch-up. Conversations would feel like fill-in-the-blank puzzles, where I'd have to rely on body language, context clues, or hand gestures to figure out what I was missing.

I did know one thing: I loved to dance. It saved me. Without dance, it would've been easier for me to be less interactive and less engaged with those around me. But dance made me focus. It made me an observant, hard worker. My disability fueled me to be the best dancer I could be.

This past year, I got my first pair of hearing aids. It's completely changed my interactions, the way I'm able to be present myself, and the way I approach my dancing. I used to get anxious when a teacher or choreographer was speaking, afraid I'd miss something important. Even standing at the barre on my right side would make me uneasy. My hearing aids have opened my world in so many ways—from things like feeling more balanced when dancing to being excited about conversations and interactions. But it's become clear to me that my work ethic and constant goal of perfection is what made me strong, resilient, and got me here today.

Being open about my journey with hearing loss has allowed me to share my story with my co-workers, my mentee who also suffers from single-sided deafness, and other dancers in the community. Dancing with AAADT has been a dream, and has afforded me the opportunity to connect to a greater purpose. Looking back, I wouldn't call my hearing loss a curse. It's ultimately been a blessing. I'm constantly reminded that I'm perfect the way I am.

To any young person who may be suffering from deafness, I encourage you to always believe in yourself and trust in the gift you've been given. Small obstacles are always a gift, because they build your strength. Don't give in to your insecurities. Take whatever you've been given and make it shine—because your story is one that needs to be shared. DS

•Courtney Celeste Spears is a dancer with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and a graduate of the Ailey/Fordham BFA program in dance.



(Third from left) Performing Wayne McGregor's *Kairos* with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

(FROM TOP) ANDREW ECCLES, COURTESY SAMANTHA FIGGINS; (2) COURTESY SAMANTHA FIGGINS; PAUL KOLNIK, COURTESY ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

The New York Times

A Muse and a Leader Embodied Power and Poise

By: Gia Kourlas

November 13, 2024

GIA KOURLAS | AN APPRAISAL

A Muse and a Leader With Vigor and Poise

Judith Jamison, an image of towering dignity, was a star of Alvin Ailey's dance company as a dancer and then as its artistic director.

THE OVATION LASTED for almost 10 minutes. The solo that prompted it was only six minutes longer.

Before the premiere of Alvin Ailey's "Cry" in 1971, Judith Jamison was hardly an unknown quantity. But after it, she was a singular sensation, a headliner, the embodiment of poise and power. From then on she was unofficially America's most celebrated Black female dancer — maybe even the world's.

Jamison, who died on Saturday at 81, owned every room she walked into. She was alive from every angle, a force of three-dimensional expression. In all of her dancing there was her electrifying body, long and tall, the image of towering dignity. Her stature was imposing, but she was pliant, too — a container of sensations. She could *move*.

"Cry," a solo in which a dancer explores a woman's path from slavery and loss to a state of grace, was her signature role. Ailey dedicated it to "all Black women everywhere — especially our mothers," and in it Jamison was a rapturous pillar of strength and sorrow.

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A Muse and a Leader Embodied Power and Poise

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After the costume she was meant to wear in "Cry" was deemed unsuitable at the last minute, two leotards were combined to add extra material to the sleeves. That's how long her arms were. In motion, they seemed to grow out of her back like willowy branches reaching longer and longer still, as if daring to touch the sun.

A film from a 1972 gala shows Jamison in the second section of "Cry," set to Laura Nyro's "Been on a Train." As she spins across the floor, her arms are propellers guiding her spiraling torso. There is a pause in the music, and Jamison quiets, too, dropping an arm in resignation before descending to the floor in a slow-motion contraction. Later, to the lyric, "there's nothing left to say or do," Jamison, seated, parts her legs, rocking her torso in tiny circles. She reaches, her fingers splayed and delivers the cry of the title — a silent scream, inspired by a photograph in Life magazine of a woman with a baby during the Biafran War.

The way emotion seeps into her dancing, even on video, is searing. It's not pasted on, it's not separate from her physicality. The power of that impulsiveness makes it seem as if she could reach for feelings deep inside her body and urge them past her skin to unfurl into the world.

Jamison was Ailey's muse, as complicated as that word is, and she was able to bring his feelings, his ideas to life because of who *she* was. "It is a face born to cry the blues," Clive Barnes wrote in The Times, when she premiered in "Cry." "But when she smiles it is with an innocent radiance, a joyfulness that is simple and lovely."

But that didn't mean that the choreographic process for "Cry" was simple, or that the dance was one note. There was, between Ailey and Jamison, some heat, some tension — a relationship, writes Jennifer Dunning in her Ailey biography, of both love and hate. During the eight-day creation of "Cry," Dunning writes, "There were battles of will between the two, who were both dieting hard and working under the gun to get the dance done quickly."

Jamison left Ailey for Broadway in 1980, and formed her own group, the Jamison Project, in 1988. After Alvin Ailey died, in 1989, she stepped into the artistic directorship of the company. It was natural that the muse became the leader, the guiding light, because as a muse she was a leader, too: building dances, right alongside Ailey, with her body and mind.



JACK MITCHELL/ALVIN AILEY DANCE FOUNDATION, INC., VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

Judith Jamison in Alvin Ailey's "Cry," which premiered in 1971. The work was Jamison's signature role.

Alive from every angle, a force of three-dimensional expression.

It's difficult to wrap my head around the timing of her death. It's a loss that mingles with the disappointment, exhaustion and anger that so many Black women feel in the wake of Kamala Harris's loss in the presidential election. The first section of "Cry," Jamison explained in a video about the work, was "about how much we are carrying as Black women. How much we are celebrated or not celebrated as queens. How *hard* we work."

Jamison carried a lot. As Ailey's artistic director for 21 years, she helped to make the company into something bigger than dance, just as she, in a way, was bigger than dance. The Ailey company is thriving, with a prized place in culture, but to get it there must have required some personal sacrifice from Jamison, including her own independent dance career.

But Jamison was real, too. Ralph Lemon, the choreographer and visual artist, got to know her when she was teaching at Jacob's Pillow in the late 1980s. "I have such a clear picture of her driving around the Pillow in her Jeep and wearing overalls," he said in an email. She seemed happy and free: "It was a wonderful counterpoint to the image I had of her prior," he wrote, "her more goddess-like iconic presence in the Ailey universe."

What a snapshot! You can almost see that smile, too, radiant and alive.

The Hollywood Reporter

Judith Jamison on Her Time at Alvin Ailey and the Privilege of Being a Dancer: "There's Always a Reciprocity to Performance"

By: Brande Victorian

November 27, 2023



2023 is a milestone year for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) and its artistic director emerita Judith Jamison. On May 10, Jamison celebrated her 80th birthday, and on Nov. 29, the dance company will hold its annual opening night gala celebrating its 65th season; founder Alvin Ailey and a group of Black dancers first performed under the AAADT name in New York City in March of 1958.

"Numbers and ages really do matter," says Jamison, a Philadelphia native who began dance training at the age of 6 at the Judimar School of Dance. "I love when people say, 'The number doesn't matter.' Oh, yes it does when you've been dancing most of your life. It matters a whole lot because your body is catching up to what craziness you were doing as a dancer. At 80, everything doesn't work the same way. And that's the challenge, finding out, what can I do? What can't I do? But I'm loving it."

AAADT will pay homage to Jamison's tenure as artistic director of the company from 1989-2011 during its November opening night gala and again on Dec. 19 when it premieres its "Pioneering Women of Ailey" program with special performances celebrating her alongside fellow Black women dancers Carmen de Lavallade, Denise Jefferson, and Sylvia Waters.

"One thing I can tell you is I have always been and will always be in awe of one of the most fabulous artists that I've ever had the privilege of working with, and that's Carmen de Lavallade," says Jamison. "She doesn't get enough said about her. She's a total icon. And she's done everything. She's been a guest artist with American Ballet Theater, she was doing a one-woman show when she must've been 80-something. My hat is off to her.

"When I think of some of the things I've done, for me, they're on a good level," Jamison adds. "I'm not belittling what I've done, but all of us have contributed something very different, and I always consider them to have contributed even more than I have."

Jamison talks to THR about learning from Ailey, working on Broadway with the likes of Gregory Hines and Mercedes Ellington and how she was discovered.

When you joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1965, did you have a sense that it was the beginning of something great for you?

No, I didn't have any revelations like that. I was like a kid in a China shop. Agnes DeMille discovered me in Philadelphia. Everybody thinks Mr. Ailey brought me in but it was Agnes DeMille. We did a piece called The Four Marys and my first gig was as a guest artist with American Ballet Theater. So, I'm in New York for the first time. By the time Mr. Ailey saw me at this audition for a Harry Belafonte special that Donald McKayle was choreographing, I thought, "Are you kidding me? This man is calling me to ask me whether I'd be interested in doing this. Yes!" And when I walked into my first rehearsal, I was put very much at ease by James Truitte who I'd seen dance. He was one of the original members of Ailey, and I had seen him perform already. But I walked into this small rehearsal studio at the YWCA on the West Side, at 50th and 8th Avenue, and in each corner of the room, somebody was learning something. My eyes were wide open, and I was fascinated. There was no time to go, "Oh, this is a pivotal time in my life." It's only in retrospect that that happened.

Six years later you performed Cry for the first time, a piece Ailey dedicated to Black women that has gone on to be one of the signature choreographies of the company. What do you remember about that night in 1971?



I didn't think anything unusual had happened when the curtain went down, except people kept applauding. We had gotten that before, but not by myself with a standalone solo. So when I did Cry that night, I hadn't run it from beginning to end, so I didn't know what it was going to do to me. And God bless the late Dudley Williams because he saw that it looked like my legs must have been jelly when it came to that last section, and he came from the back of the theater to stage right and just his look and his enthusiasm and how he was using his arms. He was encouraging me, "Keep going, keep going, keep going." They still do that to this day, the dancers, whenever a young woman does Cry. There's so much enthusiasm that at times when I was AD [artistic director], I had to tell them, "Okay, shut it down, y'all. The audience is going to hear you cheering the person on." But that care and that love is there to get you through no matter what. And when the curtain went down, I was on the floor. I literally fell out on the floor. Emotionally, physically, and spiritually it wears you out if you really put your whole self in it. So the curtain went down, there's lots of applause. Of course, as a performer, there's no way they're going to raise the curtain up and you'd be lying on the floor, so I get up and I take a bow, and I kept taking bows over and over until I don't know which number it was, but they were still screaming and yelling.

I still didn't find anything particularly unusual until Mr. Ailey came backstage, and he said, "What I do next? I don't even know if he knew it was going to go where it went because you don't choreograph thinking, "Let me make a hit." You choreograph out of the depths of your soul and your spirit and your honesty and your truth and your gut. And it could fall flat on its face, you know? But it didn't. I was older so it didn't happen to me when I first joined the company and I think that was wonderful, but I still got sucked in because it becomes a whirlwind. Young people don't understand once you reach that level of people really loving you and then the press gets a hold of you, it takes you to places you have never been. People are surrounding you that never surrounded you before. You have to make decisions.

How did you handle that?

I had a lot of guidance. And I still did stupid things, but I had some really good guidance. The agent for the company, his name was Paul Szilard, he died when he was 99 years old. He was marvelous, we called him the last of the impresarios because he was. And he became my agent as well. So there was protection there. We also had a press person in place who had been working with the company for years, and she stepped forward and covered the bases that needed to be covered so I wouldn't get swamped. You have to disseminate between what's real and what's temporary, what will pass in a minute, in a heartbeat. And you can't afford to let your feet come off the ground. Keep your feet on the ground and stop trying to float. You're dancing, you're performing, you're trying to get this message across. It's not your life. To this day, it's still hard for me to get a cab. That keeps you pretty grounded.



How did your experience on Broadway and with other ballet companies compare to your time with the Alvin Ailey agency?

With Broadway, it was a completely different discipline. Can you imagine working with Gregory Hines? That was a real fantasy for me, and it was there every night. That was a very interesting period in my life. I learned a lot, not just from him, but from Mercedes Ellington who was in Sophisticated Ladies. There were always people around you that would keep you walking the right way, like bumpers. I call them spiritual walkers. They keep you on that path that you're supposed to be on. When you're performing, that's a privilege, number one. But also, it's a matter of giving, not a matter of going inside yourself so far that nobody knows who you are. There's always a reciprocity to performance. You have to go in, but you have to give it out. You have to give it back because you're not dancing in a vacuum. Just being excellent and people throwing accolades at you is passing. Stage is your heart and soul and mind and the love that you have for people. Mr. Ailey showed that to us right away by demonstration. You could see how much he loves people; he wasn't dancing just to show himself off.

Broadway was eight shows a week of what I thought in the beginning was the same thing over and over and over again. What woke me up was one day I came out on stage and my first entrance was just walking out and meeting Gregory. And he would gesture to me, and his hand would be standing there, and for some reason I was looking at the bottom of his hand instead of the top of his hand because I tripped. My heel caught in my skirt, and I fell flat on my face. First entrance. And that's when you wake up and ask yourself, well number one, where's your head that you can all of a sudden fall flat on your face? That means you're taking for granted that you're doing eight shows a week and thinking that eight shows are the same thing. You're not considering the audience. You're not considering your fellow artists that are dancing. You're not considering the whole entity of performance. It's a completely different discipline than concert modern dance and just as important. And I got straightened out real quick.

Talk about coming back to AAADT and the day you assumed the role of artistic director.
We were in St. Louis in 1988. I was in a restaurant with Mr. Ailey, who had invited me to lunch. He had asked me to come on tour with the company and I knew he was ill. I hadn't been on tour because I'd started the Jamison Project and he basically, just said, "I'd like you to run the company." And I said, no question, "Sure." It was no question because I'd been working with him from '65 and seeing him live since '63 in Philadelphia when I was in college. This man, I loved completely. I absolutely loved him. And when he said that to me, it's like, what do you, you know? That was simply it. And by '89 he passed.

What were some of the biggest challenges stepping into that role?
Well, for the first two years, I wouldn't say there were many because the only thing that was in mind was this is going to stay afloat, and we were going to honor and elevate and make sure history understands who this man was by our existence and by our excellence and by our love for what we do. But it was a whirlwind because when I took over, we were in a lot of debt. A lot of debt. Ironically, the debt was coming from honoring someone else. He was so dedicated to making sure that this person was honored, and that person was Katherine Dunham. In order to put these productions on, it costs a lot of money. And by the time I took over, it was difficult. But when I think back on it, I didn't think, "Oh, how am I going to do this?" I'm doing whatever I have to be doing. I'm already in it. So there's no time to go, "Now what do I do?" It's just, do. I never go down that route. I don't understand why anybody would go down that route because you're not going to get anything done. Most of us want to go back. But if you're in a whirlwind, you don't have time.

Of all of the accolades you've received personally and as part of the company, are there any you're most proud of?



Seeing the company dancers each generation. Every generation that comes speaks to the genius of a man named Alvin Ailey. We're getting farther and farther away from people even knowing him, not seeing him, meeting him, anything, and every generation has to continue the legacy and love it, and if they don't, they need to go someplace else. So the more I see these young dancers who can do so much more technically than we ever could be, I'm inspired to let them. I always am proud of them when they do come to a revelation about *Revelations*, about *Blues Suite*. When that light bulb finally goes on, your dancing changes in ways. And when you're challenged by all the other repertory that's in the company—there's got to be over 200 now because Mr. Ailey did 75 — when you honor that, and you know how important it is to not have your history erased like people are trying to do again. When you realize that you can't have that happen, you can't let anybody do that to you, the way you keep that up is to educate yourself, love what you're doing, be excellent about what you're doing, and keep a good sense of humor. People forget that sometimes.

Mr. Ailey used to remind us if we got too all high and mighty in our heads, "You know you're a dancer?" He'd say it in such a way that wasn't derogatory, but it was loaded with, look, this is a privilege for you to be able to get on stage and make a living doing these things. And you should enjoy that and understand how privileged you are to be gifted with these God gifts that are given to you. So enjoy it. And have some levity.
This article was also picked up by: Yahoo News

DANCE magazine

How Judith Jamison Started Dancing for Alvin Ailey

By: Courtney Escoyne

May 2023 Issue *(Online: 5/4/23)*



"Cry is Alvin's work but, when I dance it, it is mine, too," Jamison said in the November 1972 issue of *Dance Magazine* of the iconic solo Ailey created on her. "Dance is a very perfect thing. You give yourself to it, yet you have to prove your power over it.... I have to make it happen!"

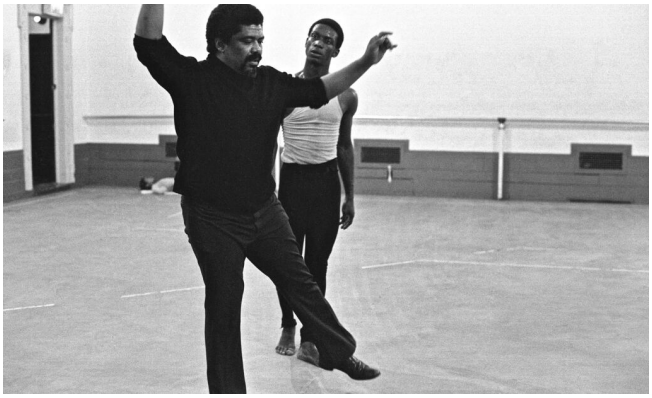
Simply Divine

"There is about her an aura of mysticism. She appears onstage, larger than life, more an apparition than a performer, compelling us to look upon her as we might a temple dancer—with a sense of religiosity, of awe." Those were the opening lines of Olga Maynard's November 1972 *Dance Magazine* cover story on Judith Jamison, then in her late 20s and at the height of her powers as a star performer with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Her professional start, however, was far from assured: Though Agnes de Mille recruited her to dance *The Four Marys* with American Ballet Theatre when it premiered in 1965, the contract was short-lived, leading Jamison to work nondance jobs (including as a ride operator at the World's Fair) while taking classes and auditioning. "Nothing in my life, until then, had prepared me for rejection," she told *Dance Magazine*. "Every time I was turned down I took it personally." It was at one such unsuccessful audition that summer, for Donald McKayle, that Alvin Ailey spotted her and decided to ask her to join his company. ("You mean, you decided to take me *that* day, the day of the audition?" Jamison asked Ailey when the two told the story of their first encounter to Maynard. "I went home and cried for three days until you called me!" Ailey replied, "Well, I didn't know where to find you and I had to get your phone number from Carmen [de Lavallade] and Carmen was out of town.") Jamison would dance with Ailey for the next 15 years (save for a brief period between 1966 and 1967 when the company disbanded), and returned to lead the company in 1989 as Ailey's handpicked successor. Now artistic director emerita, Jamison, who celebrates her 80th birthday this month, is the recipient of a Dance Magazine Award (1972), a Kennedy Center Honor (1999) and a National Medal of Arts (2001), and was inducted into the National Museum of Dance Hall of Fame in 2015. —*Courtney Escoyne*

, Courtesy DM Archives

THIRTEEN PBS

Connecting Dancer Alvin Ailey's Life Story with Classrooms



Acclaimed choreographer Alvin Ailey infused his life story and Black cultural roots into his modern dance works, which have been enjoyed by millions since he first founded Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1958 in New York City. Early dances such as *Revelations* remain favorites in the company repertory today, but many people don't know the background of the artist, who died in 1989.

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and The WNET Group's Kids' Media and Education team have embarked on an exciting new collaboration to bring new video and related educational materials about Alvin Ailey to educators around the country. The new resources use the film "Portrait of Ailey" to connect high school classrooms to Ailey's life story and to provide information on how to analyze and understand the art of dance. The materials are available on PBS LearningMedia, a dynamic website that offers preK-12 educators access to thousands of resources from PBS stations and partners.

"I wanted to do the kind of dance that could be done for the man on the streets, the people. I wanted to show Black people that they could come down to these concert halls. That it was part of their culture being done there. And that it was universal."

As a public media provider, The WNET Group's mission includes connecting New York City's outstanding arts organizations with audiences nationwide, and to inform, educate and entertain. The film "Portrait of Ailey," produced by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and associated education materials can be used by teachers around the U.S., with guidance on how the resources meet each state's learning standards for grades 9 through 12. The film reveals a thoughtful artist who drew on life experience to create dance, and also followed his curiosity into the unknown. It will be presented in eight parts; two–Alvin Ailey's Texas Roots and Alvin Ailey's California Inspirations– are available now.



Ailey's early years unfolded on the edges of the U.S. before he became a central figure of modern dance, touring the world with his company. He was raised in poverty in 1930s Texas, picking cotton as a small child and loving blues and gospel music. Ailey spent his teenage years in California, studying dance with modern dance pioneer Lester Horton and performing in his early 20s with Carmen de Lavallade and Maya Angelou. He moved to New York City in 1954.

The U.S. government chose Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to represent American dance on sponsored tours in Asia and Australia in 1962, and in China in 1985. Ailey's choreography was broadcast around the globe when he set *Revelations* on the Ballet Folklorico for the opening ceremonies of the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, the first Olympics broadcast live and in color. The company tours internationally to this day, performing the works of Ailey and contemporary choreographers.

The new education resources on PBS LearningMedia supports the aim of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to "allow a new generation of students to learn more about Ailey as a dancer, choreographer, celebrity, teacher, social activist, dance ambassador, arts advocate, and supporter of new choreographic voices and visions."

The mission of the Kids' Media and Education team at WNET is to expand minds, ignite curiosity, and help children become confident and caring people. It creates video and interactive projects for multiple platforms, infusing fun with a range of curriculum-based content for kids from preschool through high school. Its projects exploring STEM, social/emotional development, language learning, history, global understanding, social justice, and the arts spark imagination, encourage critical thinking, and reflect diverse perspectives. The Kids' Media and Education team has partnered with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater as well as with the Liberty Science Center in Jersey City, NJ, and the American Classic Orchestra, among other nonprofit groups.

The WNET Group is proud to share New York City's vibrant and unparalleled arts scene and history with young people around the country through PBS Learning Media.

The New York Times

Works Inspired By Wonders

By: Holland Cotter
September 26, 2024

HOLLAND COTTER | ART REVIEW



HIROKO MASUIKE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Center top, Jennifer Packer's "Not Yet Titled" (2024); bottom, from left, John Outterbridge's "The Elder, Ethnic Heritage Series" (1971-72); Eldren Bailey's "Dancers" (1960s); and Richmond Barthé's "African Dancer" (1933), all part of the "Edges of Ailey" exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Works Inspired By Wonders

A tribute to the choreographer Alvin Ailey features paintings, sculptures and music.

Edges of Ailey
CRITIC'S PICK
Whitney Museum of American Art

WITH THE POWERHOUSE, sense-surround show "Edges of Ailey" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the New York art season gets off to an exuberant, enveloping, though puzzling start.

The show is a major institutional tribute to the American choreographer and performer Alvin Ailey (1931-1989). It's also a relatively rare example of a traditionally object-intensive art museum giving full-scale treatment to the ephemeral medium of dance.

But if you anticipated, as I did, that this would mean a display of documentary photographs, some archival materials (costumes, stage designs), and — best — extensive examples of dance on film, you've got a surprise in store.

"Modern dance seemed to encapsulate all of my ideas," Ailey said in a 1984 interview. "There was movement, there was color, there was painting, there was sculpture, and there was the putting it all together."

The show takes Ailey at his word. It's the

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"all" he speaks of that's here. On the Whitney's fifth floor you enter a wide-open gallery dominated by an 18-channel video montage of flickering bodies and talking heads. But it serves as a kind of audiovisual backdrop to many dozens of objects — paintings, sculptures, collages, prints — rich in imaginative variety, diverse in content, and many with no immediate connection to Ailey. Which is where puzzlement sets in: How "Ailey" is the show? And, for that matter, how much about dance?

The Whitney organizers — Adrienne Edwards, senior curator and associate director of curatorial programs; Joshua Lubin-Levy, a curatorial research associate and scholar of photography and performance; and C J Salapare, a curatorial assistant — have clearly anticipated these questions. And they've addressed them by organizing a kind of parallel show, this one on the museum's third floor: a program of live performances by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and an impressive roster of guest artists to be presented throughout the exhibition's run.

Edges of Ailey
CRITIC'S PICK
Through Feb. 9 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in Manhattan; 212-570-3600, whitney.org. During the run there will be more than 90 live dance events in the museum's third-floor theater, as well as classes, workshops and talks.

What you get in the fifth-floor gallery — which is what most visitors will see — is something different, formally more static, but still dynamic. Basically, it's an evocation of Ailey, and his dance, through the lens of African American visual art, which is a record and reflection of the Black culture that shaped him, and that he helped shape.

Dance was and is part of that culture, and images of it come right upfront in an introductory display, notably sculptures of widely varying styles and dates: Richmond Barthé's classic, ecstatic "African Dancer" from 1933 is here; so is an image of a jitterbugging couple molded from raw concrete in the 1960s by Eldren M. Bailey, a self-taught cemetery sculptor from Georgia; and there's a 1976 abstract work by the American artist Senga Nengudi. Made of nylon pantyhose mesh filled with sand, it was designed to be manipulated in performances, and, as seen in a photograph, suggests a dancer stretching at the barre.

There are also dance-themed paintings. Two by the much-watched figurative artists Jennifer Packer and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, were produced expressly for the show. A scribbly little black oil stick drawing by the artist-choreographer Ralph Lemon titled "Alvin Ailey Dancing Revelations #3" might easily have been a commission too, but dates from 1999.

From this introductory point, which follows a winding path through a series of island-like displays, the exhibition takes on a broadly biographical cast, with work that evokes Ailey's personal history, what he called his "blood memories."

To someone born, as Ailey was, into a line of sharecroppers in rural Texas, the sculptures here of the Southern artist Beverly Buchanan, in the form of miniature shacks pieced together from scrap wood, might not look entirely fanciful. And to someone immersed early in the Black church — as Ailey was, his signature dance "Revelations" came from it — with its exhortative sonorities and Afro-Caribbean overlays, neither the image of a heaven-pointing preacher in a painting by Benny Andrews, nor the presence of a pair of Fon ritual drums, would have felt foreign.

Ailey was raised by his mother — his father left them early on — and her constant quest for employment and safety had them moving around a lot. In the 1940s, they joined the Great Migration out of the rural South. Three smokey-dark, tangled-line paintings of crowds by the self-taught artist Purvis Young, along with Martin Puryear's bronze sculpture, "The Rest," in the shape of a handcart, evoke that exodus.

Mother and son settled in Los Angeles, where Ailey thrived as a museum-going, notebook-keeping gay kid mesmerized by theater, and particularly by modern dance after seeing performances by the Black choreographer Katherine Dunham and meeting, in high school, his close friend and future dance partner Carmen de Lavallade. Both women are present as portraits in a section of the show devoted to images of Black women who influenced Ailey early and late.

The show's idea of using art to demonstrate the personal and cultural influences that made Ailey the artist he was works better in some applications than in others. I don't usually think of his dances — apart from a few pieces like "Masekela Language" — as political in the activist way that the show's "Black Liberation" section defines that. But the grouping of work devoted to the theme of "Black Music" seems right on point.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY HIROKO MASUIKE/THE NEW YORK TIMES



Top left, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's "Fly Trap" (2024). Top right, a block of the AIDS Memorial Quilt (1987) with a panel for Ailey at top right. Above, Charles White's "Preacher" (1952), left, and Benny Andrews's "The Way to the Promised Land" (1994) at right. From left, Geoffrey Holder's "Portrait of Carmen de Lavallade" (1976), Beauford Delaney's "Marian Anderson" (1965) and Loïs Mailou Jones's "Jennie" (1943). Below, Maren Hassinger's "River" (1972/2012).



Music — from Ralph Vaughan Williams, to Mahalia Jackson, to Laura Nyro — was the engine that drove Ailey's dance. It's everywhere here. It's in the air thanks to the eclectic score for the mural-like video piece by Kya Lou and Josh Begley, filmmakers who worked with Edwards, the curator. And it's in individual works in the "Black Music" section, with their references to Charlie Parker (in a painting by Beauford Delaney), to Billie Holiday and Nina Simone (in a sculpture by Charles Gaines), and to the pantheon of Black blues and soul luminaries named in Kerry James Marshall's 1998 "Souvenir IV."

Marshall's grandly scaled grisaille painting, a lament for — and shout out to — musicians lost, is just a plain wonderful thing, an outstanding entry in a show that has many. Others include Clementine Hunter's painting of a white-robed Louisiana river baptism; Wadsworth Jarrell's sizzling pointillist portrait of Angela Davis; David Hammons's dark-star explosion of a sculpture made from wire, plastic beads and human hair; and, concluding the show, a monumental excerpt from the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt with the panel commemorating Ailey, who died at 58 as a result of the disease.

So the exhibition on the Whitney's fifth floor gives you a lot: an atmospheric soak in cultural history, insight into a creative life (examples of Ailey's voluminous writings — letters, stories, choreographic notes-to-self — are installed throughout), and some terrific art. But what it doesn't give you is sustained in-motion images of dance. You only see Ailey dance in peripheral ways — in quick clips in the video montage and on small screens in a small space outside the main installation.

But there are ways, even in a traditional museum setting, to get dance on the main stage, to make it part of the fixed format of an object-based show. In the treasurable exhibition called "Merce Cunningham: Common Time," at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 2017, the galleries were devoted primarily to Merce-related objects. But certain walls were left clear and used as big screens on which performance film were projected. Benches were set up. You could, if you wanted to, and had time — and I did — see long, unbroken portions of Cunningham dances, which gave everything else in the show a living context, an aesthetic utility.

I've visited "Edges of Ailey" twice, and lingered both times. I love the look of it, the sound of it, the ideas it floats. But I miss the element that gives all brilliant dance-makers their edge, the one that counts: dance itself. For that, I look forward to sampling the rest of the show, its performance program, in the months ahead.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Exhibition Review: [Alvin Ailey's Art On Sprawling Display]

By: Robert Greskovic

October 9, 2024

ARTS IN REVIEW



Installation and performance view of 'Edges of Ailey' at the Whitney.

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Alvin Ailey's Art On Sprawling Display

The Whitney devotes a show to the renowned American choreographer

By Robert Greskovic

New York

'EDGES OF AILEY," curated by Adrienne Edwards with assistance from Joshua Lubin-Levy and CJ Salapare, which runs through Feb. 9, 2025, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, mates a full-floor, 18,000-square-foot gallery display with a program of over 90 live dance performances, classes and talks presented two floors below in the museum's intimate theater. Its subject is the life, art and what its promotional materials call "adjacencies" of dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey (1931-1989), whose career in modern dance led him to international renown.

The gallery installation includes more than 290 artworks by over 80 artists chosen to position them in aesthetic relationship to Ailey, as well as over 150 pieces of ephemera, mostly shown on the perimeter of the space, where they amount to a sprawling scrapbook featuring handwritten pages of Ailey's journal-like jottings and ruminations, as well as family snapshots and photographs, some documenting Ailey's performing days. Streaming above all this is a frieze-like loop of audio and visual projections that make for a large-scale, animated, upper-story element of performance excerpts and talking heads culled from recordings of Ailey's life and works.

This 18-screen expanse reveals sometimes grainy footage with often fuzzy audio that makes it tricky to focus on those speaking amid the gallery's ambient sounds. "I'm Alvin Ailey. I'm a choreographer. I'm a Black man whose roots are in the sun and the dirt of the South," for instance, can be heard in passing if one can home in on Ailey's mellow, delicately resonant voice, but those words are better conveyed as a heading for the "Southern Imaginary" wall label.



Ailey circa 1960, two years after he founded his company.

Ailey's life as a gay man is documented here through the loose leaves of his displayed writings and grouped into the show's "Black Liberation (Queerness)" section. No related sound bites exist from his on-camera interviews, where his private life remained private as, arguably, the times demanded.

Given their number and often large-scale dimensions, the paintings, sculpture and artifacts—all categorized by headers that range from "Blackness in Dance" to "Ailey's Influences"—dominate the space. There are not only big-name visual artists, such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Kara Walker, but—for me—unfamiliar ones. And while the paintings, in general, can often feel more incidental than integral to the performing art that Ailey practiced, I found those of the self-taught Purvis Young (1943-2010) most affecting—at once raw of touch and delicate of color, making for painterly blends offering naif figures and atmospheric cityscapes.

Museum-goers familiar with the eagerly attended December seasons of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at City Center—this year's will run from Dec. 4 through January 2025—might wonder why Ailey's ever-popular 1960 dance suite "Revelations," created two years after he founded his company, and set to spirituals and gospel music, isn't as prominent here. While this, the troupe's signature work, closes nearly every one of the company's programs at City Center, signs of it are fleeting in the Whitney's displays.

One of them comes in a vitrine at the left end of the gallery, where it should not be missed. It's a modestly presented, slightly creased Kaufmann Concert Hall program from the dance's premiere year, when its three parts included 16 numbers; today's now-standard 3-part structure features 11.

Some years ago, Sylvia Waters, a veteran AADT dancer and the first artistic director of Ailey II, AADT's second company, spoke of Ailey's basic interest in his dancers' abilities: "Alvin wanted a ballet bottom and a modern top," she noted, meaning he preferred his dancers to have strong, limber and articulate legs and feet, complemented by a flexible and dynamic torso and arms.

The Whitney's performance component began last month. I caught one bill, called "Harmonic Echo," danced by Ailey II. Its 4-part program offered excerpts from three Ailey dances, plus one by Judith Jamison, who over her long career had been a stellar Ailey dancer and the first artistic director of AADT following Ailey's death.

The approximately half-hour presentation was danced with authority and ease, with each featured man and woman projecting strength and confidence throughout. It was a special pleasure to see these impressively trained dancers up close, framed within the confines of the Whitney's 109-capacity venue. Theatrical rewards from the stylish and economic means that Ailey deftly employed with simple costuming and props held sway—a neck scarf or a fringed shawl establishing character, or a stool indicating place.

Alvin Ailey died of AIDS-related complications at age 58, having made his last dance in 1988, the year before his death. The nearly year-by-year chronology in the show's hefty and profusely illustrated 388-page catalog continues beyond 1989 with four select years to note significant publications—a 1996 biography and a 1997 dissertation on Ailey's choreography—and special honors that have sustained Ailey's legacy.

"Edges of Ailey" sometimes keeps the man and his art at the physical edges of this expansive exhibition, but even when the show's related artworks tower in size and shape, dominating the gallery's expanse, they do so as Alvin Ailey's spirit accumulates all around them.

Edges of Ailey
Whitney Museum of American Art, through Feb. 9, 2025

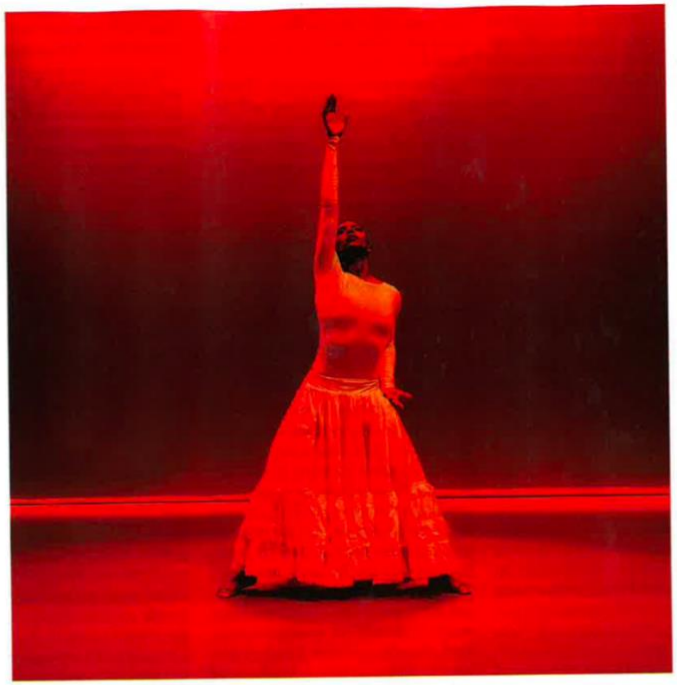
Mr. Greskovic writes about dance for the Journal.

THE NEW YORKER

The House That Alvin Ailey Built

By: Hilton Als

October 21, 2024 Print Issue



A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE IMPRESARIO

Alvin Ailey's crusade to build a home for himself and other Black dancers.

BY HILTON ALS

In 1960, the twenty-nine-year-old Alvin Ailey premièred his landmark work, "Revelations," with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, the company he'd founded to showcase Black culture through dance. This marked the end of his apprenticeship as a young choreographer who'd grown up revering Katherine Dunham, Lester Horton, Martha Graham, and Jack Cole—American masters with an international perspective. It also launched him into critical purgatory.

From the start, the thirty-six-minute piece, which depicts Black resilience and Christian faith, and is set to various spirituals, was a hit with audiences, both because of Ailey's preternatural talent for constructing graphic stage pictures and because it took us to church without our having to *go* to church. You do not need to have been raised in the South, as Ailey was, or to have attended Baptist services, as he did with his mother, in order to understand what he is doing here, particularly in the final section of the piece, set to the triumphant "Wade in the

Samantha Figgins rehearsing Ailey's piece "Cry" at the Whitney Museum, in September.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DIANA MARKOSIAN

Water." The dancers, clad in light colors, step high, their backs straight and heads held high, as they walk across baptismal waters toward their own glory. (Stretches of fluttering fabric simulate the water, an effect that Ailey, a magpie by nature, no doubt borrowed from Jerome Robbins, who did something similar to create a river in "The King and I," in 1951.) But what you are watching is not just a parade of "vertical saints," as James Baldwin described his churchgoing brethren, but the work of a choreographer who aims to show us how the metaphysical moves.

In "Revelations," Ailey turns away from Martha Graham's anxious world of men and women and myth, from George Balanchine's plotless ballets, and from Merce Cunningham's brilliant abstract explorations of the body. Here and in his subsequent work, Ailey tells a different story, one in which the music, the Black dancers' inner lives, and the choreographer's memories are the narrative. This shift was especially potent—vital—at a time when the Civil Rights Act was still four years away and activists and protesters were being beaten and burned to death. Without pandering to white tastes or shutting white people out, "Revelations" is resolute in its insistence on portraying Black life and community. The only stage performance from that time that is remotely analogous to "Revelations" is Lorraine Hansberry's play "A Raisin in the Sun" (1959)—the story of a Black family that doesn't give up, a story for all families.

After "Revelations," Ailey continued working for almost three decades—until his death, in 1989—choreographing more than seventy dances. You can see some of them live or in archival footage or photographs, and in dialogue with art that Adrienne Edwards, the protean senior curator and director of curatorial programs at the Whitney Museum of American Art, has gathered, in "Edges of Ailey," the largest and most comprehensive examination of Ailey's life, work, influences, and inspirations ever assembled. On the museum's eighteen-thousand-square-foot fifth floor are works by eighty-two artists, including Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Lorna Simpson, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Romare Bearden, and Alma Thomas, which illustrate and intersect with Ailey's themes. There are videos of historic performances, and live stagings by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and Ailey II in the third-floor theatre. It took Edwards six and a half years to put the show together, but, as she told me this summer, it was a lifetime in the making.

Every curator is a storyteller. And the story that Edwards aims to tell in "Edges of Ailey" is that of Ailey's many permutations and trajectories—his desire to keep moving forward as a dancer, a choreographer, a teacher, a writer. In the process, she reveals him to have been more culturally important than he is generally given credit for being. Edwards relied greatly on Ailey's voluminous notebooks and diaries to chart his story, which could not be recounted in a linear way. "What I could do," she told me, "was relate to things that I found to be illuminating about him, trying to get into a headspace of what it would be like to be a gay man in the nineteen-forties and nineteen-fifties, especially during this moment in his life where you're founding this thing and coming of age." Edwards sees Ailey's literary, theatrical, and intellectual loves as a form of company. In his notebooks, we see him planning and imagining possible projects: a ballet inspired by the life and work of Hart Crane, say, or an exploration of the genius of Federico García Lorca, or of Tennessee Williams—all queer artists who don't directly appear in Ailey's dances but who formed a kind of brotherhood in his mind. A lifelong autodidact, he had a deep admiration for writers who were able to speak of their queerness, at least through metaphor. The ultimate metaphor for Ailey was the body, and his work was the language with which to articulate it.

In Ailey's career, "Revelations" was both a blessing and a curse: a blessing because it kept audiences coming back, and a curse because his subsequent attempts to push against the perimeters of dance—or, more specifically, Black dance—were often measured against that masterpiece and found wanting. Arlene Croce, in her review, in this magazine, of Ailey's winter 1974 season at City Center—which included "Revelations" and "Masekela Langage" (1969), a work set to the music of the South African composer Hugh Masekela which addresses apartheid—expresses her frustration with Ailey, with his tendency, as she writes, to be "remarkably consistent in trying to capitalize on 'Revelations' as if it were a *formula* success." She goes on:

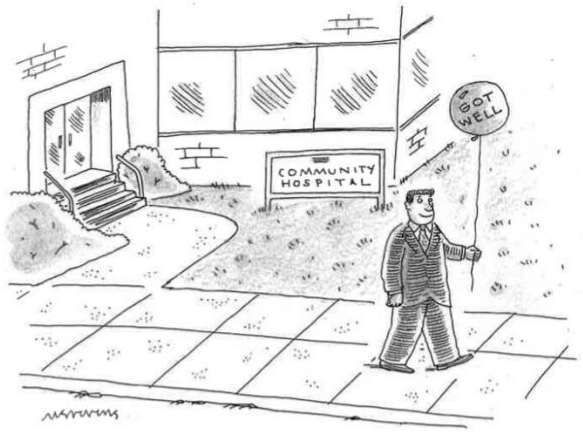
> The Ailey company is . . . loading up on religious and secular song suites, feeding its audience with a particular kind of material when all that matters is how that material—or *any* material—is assembled. With musicals slipping badly in recent years, the Ailey has been drawing a lot of people who think of it as a higher substitute for Broadway. They find what they are looking for in only one piece. It doesn't take them long to discover that "Revelations" is the higher substitute for the Ailey.

Joan Acocella, also writing here, nearly forty years later, observed:

> The dancers of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre are thrilling, and the dances they do are mostly sentimental and conventional. There are exceptions, notably the company's signature work, "Revelations." . . . This piece is relentlessly programmed by the Ailey troupe. During the present season . . . it closes nearly two-thirds of the performances. The spectators wouldn't have it any other way. They clap along; they vocalize. At the end, they jump to their feet and shout, and demand an encore (which they get).

In both reviews, it's the "they" that concerns me; there's a whole lot of othering going on, like when white people ask why Black people talk to the screen so much during a movie. There's also the assumption that a work this popular must be easy. Judith Jamison, Ailey's great star, made this mistake, too. When she first saw the company rehearsing "Revelations," in 1963, she said, "Oh, I can do that!" Later, as she writes in her autobiography, "Dancing Spirit," she changed her tune: "Guess what? *You* try it sometime. The dancers made the movement look easy. It's not. It takes unbelievable coordination. It takes passion, commitment, dedication, and love to know that every step you do should be infused with 100 percent of yourself."

The dance world has always been a segregated place, divided as much by class as by European cultural history. Ailey was an uneven choreographer, for sure, but what he wanted to promote with his company was the idea that Black audiences—general Black audiences, like the folks Acocella probably saw applauding "Revelations"—should connect not only with their "buked" and "scorned" selves onstage but with the feeling that performance can be a kind of balm, an embrace.



"Revelations" grew in part out of memories—of the people who made up Ailey's community, and thus of Ailey himself. He was born in 1931. His birthplace: a little Texas town called Rogers, between Austin and Waco. This is the territory you'll find in a Katherine Anne Porter story—"He" (1927), say, or "Noon Wine" (1937)—a world that consists of hard earth and mean poverty, a world where Jim Crow is a defining factor. And so is Jesus. Ailey's parents, Alvin, Sr., and the beautiful and theatrical Lula, met in church and married when Lula was fourteen. Four years later, their only child was born, but the marriage wasn't working. When Alvin was three months old, his father took off. Then he returned. He was feckless. "He just didn't have the education to take care of a family," Lula says in Jennifer Dunning's rich biography "Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance" (1996). When Lula expressed her discontent to her father, he told her to stay married; nevertheless, Lula used her sharecropper's wages to buy train tickets that got her and her son about a hundred and fifty miles away, to Wharton, where Lula picked cotton for a time, accompanied, on occasion, by Alvin. These were years of closeness, of Lula sharing stories from books that she bought on the cheap, and Alvin showing her a house that he dreamed of living in. There was also violence. As Ailey recounts in his autobiography, "Revelations," which was published posthumously, in 1995:

> When I was about five years old, my mother was raped by four white men. She never admitted to me that it happened. She only recently found out that I knew about it. One night she didn't come home until ten P.M. She usually came home at three or four in the afternoon. She probably had been working in some white people's kitchen. That was the other kind of work, along with picking cotton, available to black people. It was very clear to me that my mother was crying. She had bruises all over her body. I don't think she ever told anyone about it except maybe her sisters or friends from church.

Violence can beget violence. The rage that was burned into Lula's skin—the rage of poverty and abuse—was sometimes turned on Alvin. He recalls in his book that when Lula drank she'd beat him. Alvin's tears when that happened were evidence not only of physical hurt but of longing: a longing to express how it feels to be wounded, to be loveless. Lula did love him, though, and it showed in all the menial jobs and the small and big humiliations that she endured to support him.

In 1936, she saw a newspaper ad for a job preparing meals for a highway crew eighty miles away, in Navasota. While the five-year-old Alvin stayed with a relative in Wharton, she secured the job, and also found romance with Amos Alexander, a churchgoing Black businessman who was well respected by both Black and white townspeople. Eventually, Lula and Alvin went to live in Alexander's house.

When Ailey writes, in his autobiography, about his gratitude for the stability of that home and his love for Alexander, who became like a father to him, he seems to rest in a kind of languid joy—the same emotion that one sees and feels at times when watching "Revelations," which is presented partly from a child's perspective, particularly in the last section, set on the Sabbath. A big Texas sun shines down on a congregation. Church ladies, sitting on stools in their Sunday best, wave their fans and nod in acknowledgment. These "correct" ladies are joined by their Christian brothers, gentlemen in smart vests, who are a willing, proud audience to the women as they get the spirit and cast off the trials and tribulations of the week. In "Revelations," Ailey glorifies not only the female body, which most choreographers do, but also the male body, and, more specifically, the Black male dancer, who moves differently onstage than, say, a dancer like Baryshnikov (an Ailey admirer, who appeared in his 1976 piece "Pas de Duke" with Judith Jamison). You can feel that the spotlight is often on the men in Ailey's work, and his early queer experiences clearly play a part in his artistic story.

In his book, Ailey talks about a twelve-year-old named Chauncey, his best friend when he was eight, and how, one summer afternoon, he and Chauncey were playing by a water tank behind Alexander's house. It "must have been twenty feet deep," Ailey writes, "and very slick at the edges."

> On one of those hot days I fell into the tank and almost drowned. Chauncey saved my life. I went under the water three times, thrashing my arms and gasping for air, before Chauncey pulled me out. . . . Chauncey managed to push all the water out of me. As he pushed the water, he also lay on top of me. He thought it was fun to lie on me and make what amounted to sexual movements. I guess I became a kind of sexual object for Chauncey. I didn't mind, but

he introduced me to passivity, to being a kind of sexual object for an older guy.

Part of what's touching about Ailey's book is the questioning way in which he tries to define himself through language. One wonders if he wrote it in order to tell Lula who he was—the way Tennessee Williams used "The Glass Menagerie" to describe aspects of his own family and his place in it.



Family—the stability that Alexander offered—wasn't enough for Lula; her ambition kept her on the move. In late 1941, she heard about more lucrative work in California; she soon got herself to Los Angeles, while Alvin stayed behind to finish out the school year. When he arrived at Union Station, in L.A., his mother noticed that he was carrying a stained paper bag and asked what it was. It was the lunch he'd been given for the trip, he said. He'd saved some of it for her, in case she was hungry.

At first, dancing was something that Ailey did by himself, for himself, inspired by performers he loved watching onscreen: Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly. Although he and Lula were now living in the city where those movies were made, he didn't think of dancing as something that he could do professionally. "You were a sissy (*sissy* was a big word back then) if you danced," he writes. He *was* a sissy. One Halloween, when he was fifteen, he dressed up in drag; he also hung out with a group of boys who traded sex with an older man for beer and money. But he didn't get caught up in that. Culture offered more freedom. As a matter of fact, writing poetry was an escape from the raw sexuality that he overheard at home, the sounds of Lula and her second husband, Fred W. Cooper—a "navy man"—making love in their small apartment in segregated South Central Los Angeles. Another form of escape was seeing shows on Central Avenue, the street he took to and from the primarily Black Thomas Jefferson High School.

Back in the forties and fifties, on Central Avenue, which was known as Little Harlem, you could catch great performances by Pigmeat Markham, Lena Horne, and Katherine Dunham's dance troupe. Dunham, who was trained as an anthropologist, had studied and lived in Haiti and elsewhere in the Caribbean; realizing that you could go out into the world and bring back alternate vocabularies about the Black experience had an enormous effect on Ailey. Dunham became, in time, a kind of spiritual mother to him—a forerunner in his fight to establish a school where Black dance idioms could be studied.

Carmen de Lavallade, one of Ailey's gymnastics classmates in high school, had always danced; her cousin Janet Collins, whom she revered, had danced for Dunham and was the first Black prima ballerina with the Metropolitan Opera. Forward-thinking, even prescient, de Lavallade knew talent—knew possibility—when she saw it, and in Ailey she saw a dancer who needed making. One afternoon, she took him to the Lester Horton Dance Theatre, in Hollywood, where she studied. For Horton, the company was a kind of family. His dancers didn't just dance; they worked on costumes, lighting, and sets together, building the atmospheres for their dances. There was little money, and the company, which was racially mixed, had to deal with segregation when touring, but the dancers knew that what Horton was offering—a total-theatre approach—would round them out as performers. Ailey studied many genres of dance with Horton, but he still had some ambivalence about being a "sissy" dancer. After high school, he attended U.C.L.A. and later San Francisco State College, studying Romance languages and intermittently dancing with Horton. In 1953, at the age of twenty-two, he returned to Horton full time.

Horton encouraged Ailey to start making his own dances, and after Horton died, from a heart attack, later that year, Ailey became the company's choreographer. At first, his work felt derivative, to him and to de Lavallade, who was now a lead dancer. "When I started doing choreography, I was Lester all over again—Lester reincarnated," Ailey writes in "Revelations." Who were Ailey and de Lavallade without their mentor's vision? But others saw their worth, these two young performers at the height of their beauty, fluent in styles ranging from ballet to Caribbean-influenced modernism, performers who oozed sensuality and grace whenever they crossed the stage.

One of the producers of Truman Capote and Harold Arlen's musical, "House of Flowers," a story of young love set amid rival bordellos in Haiti, saw the pair perform at Jacob's Pillow in 1954, and asked them to move to New York and join the cast. Soon after Ailey and de Lavallade arrived in New York, the show's choreographer, Herbert Ross, added a dance for them, and it brought the house down. Their work was not singled out in a *Times* review by Brooks Atkinson, who praised the dancers in the language of the time. "Every Negro show includes wonderful dancing," he wrote. "Tall and short Negroes . . . torrid maidens in flashy costumes and bare-chested bucks break out into a number of wild, grotesque, animalistic dances." But the photographer and writer Carl Van Vechten was more specific in his praise, pointing out the pair's "desperate energy" before focussing on Ailey, whom he described as "young, beautiful, strong, with a perfect body and with the technique well welded into his system." He added, "He knows how to approach practically all the dance problems, except perhaps of classical ballet."

Dancers, more than any other performing artists, live in a constant state of humiliation. They are criticized in the most demeaning way: You're too heavy. Your legs are too short or too long. You don't have enough technique. You're too sexy—or not sexy enough. Throughout his life, Ailey, who had a large frame, lamented his weight, his limited ballet training, and so on, but what really upset him, I think, was the feeling that, as a queer Black kid, he lacked a certain inner grace. That grace belonged to those others, over there, and not to him. You can see in "Revelations," which he made only five years or so after appearing in "House of Flowers," a wish: to be as elegant as those Sunday ladies, as strong and self-assured as those proud gentlemen in their vests.

After "House of Flowers" closed, in 1955, Ailey's next significant gig was a long time coming. In 1957, he choreographed a duet for himself and his new dance partner Christine Lawson to use as an audition piece for the musical "Jamaica," starring Lena Horne. "Alvin looked to me like a young football player," Horne wrote. "He was so huge and beautifully built and full of energy. All of the dancers were as talented as he was, probably, and maybe a few even more so, but no one loved work more or worked harder to learn than he did." Moved by Ailey and the other dancers' commitment to their craft—how they went to class day after day, despite being low on funds and on anything like the kind of acclaim that Horne herself had received—she made sure that they could use the stage to develop their own work when the theatre was dark. "Jamaica" was a hit with audiences, if not with the critics, and by the time the show closed, in 1959, Ailey was on his way, anxious to share what he was learning.

Ailey's apprenticeship as a choreographer wasn't long—he made only ten pieces before premièring "Revelations," in New York. Filled with memories of Ailey's Texas past, "Revelations" also reflects other influences—his interest in Henry Moore's sculptures, for one, all that graphic force and reach. But, in a way, "Revelations" is bigger than itself. It's framed by Ailey's certainty that Black Americans had a story to tell—and part of that story was the Southern Black experience, an experience in which faith was a freeing agent, not a repressive one, an experience that was segregated and stained with blood, and still is, decades after Ailey's death.

On tour with Horton, Ailey had suffered the indignities of racism not only in the South but up North, too—though New York was a haven for artists who believed in integration, and in the city he had friendships that ranged farther than he would have imagined possible elsewhere. Still, as a "sissy," he had lived in the world more or less on his own. That kind of isolation can foster self-hatred in the soul. Throughout his life, Ailey struggled with what would now be called bipolar disorder. He fought to save the cross-addicted men with whom he had relationships. He died of complications from AIDS at the age of fifty-eight. (Lula outlived him by some five years.) He had not found a home for himself, but he had wanted to build one for others like him. This was a tremendous dream in 1960, and the success of "Revelations" helped him call attention to it. In 1969, in the culturally segregated world of dance, he founded the Ailey School, a training ground where dancers of color could be taught and appreciated.

The sheer amount of energy that Ailey expended in order to make a self—and, by extension, a company—that reflected his curious, closeted, fearful, sometimes thrillingly reckless nature, which is to say, all his "edges," is most stunningly represented in "Edges of Ailey" by an art work that Edwards and the filmmakers Josh Begley and Kya Lou have created. Wrapped around the perimeter of the museum's fifth floor is a video installation incorporating years of footage from the Ailey archives. You see Jamison, gorgeous and moving like no other person on earth, as she makes her way through a solo dance that Ailey choreographed for her, "Cry," from 1971. Then, seamlessly, you view the same piece performed by a more recent Ailey dancer, before continuing on to footage of Ailey's tributes to Duke Ellington, intercut with scenes from Studio 54, the energy and synthetic high of those years. Watching the film, you are sometimes startled to see the leonine head of Ailey himself. You hear him talking about the work he wants to make, or see him teaching a class, and then you witness dancers from the early years of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre pushing toward the front of a stage, their backs arched or straight, hands clenched or open, legs thrown up high or crouching, as they declare their various selves. It's a moving-image world—a visual stream that flows through Ailey's history and reflects his restlessness, his desire to stay in motion, to keep going beyond "Revelations."

Ultimately, Ailey himself wearied of his most famous piece. In his autobiography, he writes:

> About fifteen or twenty years ago, when we were setting out on a European tour, I said, "I want to stop taking this piece to Europe." I made up my mind to leave "Revelations" home. But after two performances the dancers and audiences were asking, "Where's 'Revelations'?" and of course we had to relent. It was so popular a piece that it was dangerous to lead off a performance with it. Once we did it first on a program, everybody went home after it was over. Even after all these years, we still feel that our season at New York City Center, where we play for four weeks, hasn't really begun until we do "Revelations." If we open on a Wednesday and "Revelations" isn't presented until Sunday, the stage somehow hasn't yet been blessed.

As for me, though, I'm more interested in what's next. ♦

The New York Times

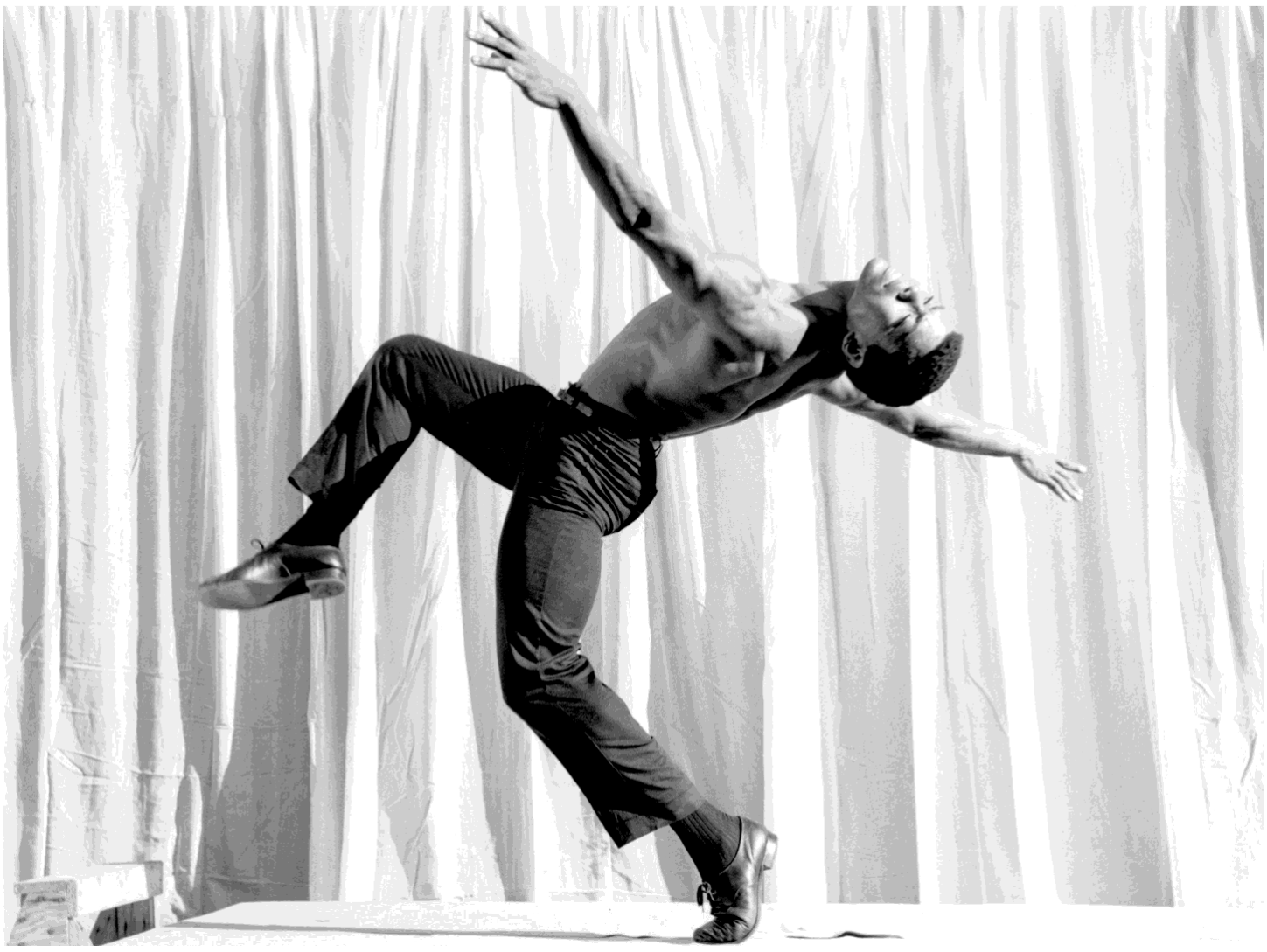
Arts & Leisure: Alvin Ailey's Unapologetic Sparkle

By: Gia Kourlas

September 15, 2024

THE NEW SEASON

Dance



Alvin Ailey's Unapologetic Sparkle

In a new show at the Whitney, the choreographer takes center stage. It's another revelation.

By GIA KOURLAS

The name Ailey is synonymous with dance. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is more than a company: It's a brand, an integral piece of the cultural fabric of this country. It's huge.

But somehow the man who created the Ailey empire has become lost inside it, obscured as if by an eclipse. Alvin Ailey was a choreographer who seamlessly melded dance forms, a dancer of extraordinary strength and beauty, and a man — a queer man — with an expansive, restless mind.

He formed his company in 1958 and died of AIDS in 1989. He was only 58. What Ailey accomplished in his short life was remarkable: Building an internationally known dance company, an esteemed school and a body of work that explored the Black experience and dance history in a multitude of ways, while also mining the culture that surrounded him. He was very much engaged in the worlds of visual art, literature, poetry, music and gay life. Everything was his clay. His company was integrated — on purpose — but he inspired Black dancers particularly, showing them that there was a place for them.

Certainly Ailey is a father of Black dance — especially of Black modern dance. Did he want to be? The Ailey organization is perhaps the only institution that has come close to or surpassed the success of modern dance's longtime artistic rival: ballet. But for Ailey, it came at a price. The weight of it all must have been crushing. "Use tea for drug needs," he advised himself in one of his personal notebooks.

"Edges of Ailey," opening at the Whitney Museum of American Art on Sept. 25, is a one-of-a-kind exhibition that looks at Ailey in all his dimensions, personal and artistic, as well as the culture that he shaped. One of the most ambitious shows the museum has ever presented — six years in the making and bigger than any Whitney biennial — it tracks the development of an American art form through Ailey's singular vision. Here is a chance to better understand the man behind that vision, to watch his dances with new eyes. Organized by Adrienne Edwards, the Engell Speyer Family Senior Curator, "Edges of Ailey" consists of an extensive exhibition in the Whitney's fifth-floor galleries, as well as a series of performances through February by the Ailey company and commissioned choreographers.

Edwards, who grew up studying dance, said Ailey was "probably the first professional art anything" she ever saw. "I've been thinking about Ailey for most of my life."

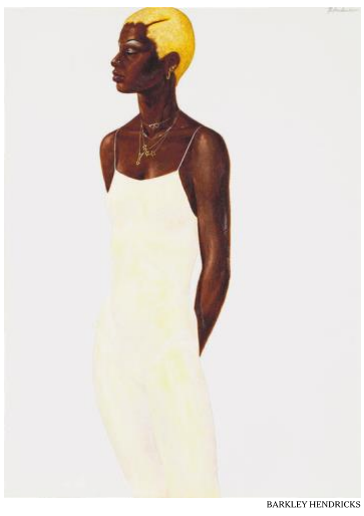
For years she remained a loyal audience member, regularly attending the annual December seasons of Ailey at New York City Center. The Whitney show, she said, could have been about a company. But as she and her curatorial team started to explore Ailey's archives — especially his notebooks — her thinking shifted. "What I realized is that we were dealing with a life," she said. "It is about the artistry, and there's real work to do there.



LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, VIA THE ARTIST, CORVI-MORA AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY



RASHID JOHNSON



BARKLEY HENDRICKS

Top, Alvin Ailey, the subject of an ambitious show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Center, "Fly Trap" by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Above, Barkley Hendricks's "Dancer" (1977). Left, Rashid Johnson's "Untitled Anxious Men" (2016). Besides showing Ailey in all of his dimensions, "Edges of Ailey" also looks at the culture he helped shaped.

But there's also this life that was so present in these notebooks."

Edwards instantly had questions: "Who was this man that started this in 1958?" she recalled thinking. "How did he arrive to that moment to do what he did?"

In Ailey's notebooks — entrusted to Allan Gray, a longtime friend at the Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City, Mo. — you see a vivid mind at work. They are filled with musings about choreographers and composers, sketches for new dances, thoughts about drugs and sex. One note, "The School Rules," leads with: "Students of the school must not smoke, cigarettes, marijuana, pot, hashish, angel dust, Marlboro, Kent etc."

The rules are harder for him to follow. On another page, he writes, "Do not take any coke." (The word "more" is crossed out.) Ditto smoking. "Plan your funeral — do will — if you continue smoking c'est pas possible!!"

Ailey, it turns out, was a writer as well as a fervent list maker. There are short stories and poetry. There are packing lists — pot, poppers — as well as an assessment of his character. One positive: "basically honest." On the negative side: "lack of self-control."

Somehow you feel Ailey through his handwriting, which ranges from shaky to bold and from cursive to all caps. His ambition and self-doubt, his humor and sadness — it's all there. One note, under the heading "1980," reads: "Nervous breakdown. 7 weeks was in hosp—" There is also unflinching generosity. Ailey created his company to show not only his own dances, but also those of others, including many Black choreographers. In one entry, "Hopes for the Future," the goal to "create choreographers" comes ahead of "create choreography."

You see Ailey's preoccupations. "Water recurs as a theme," Edwards said, and "he talks about cruising." There are other references, including erotic writing, to his life as a gay man, which he was not so open about at the time. Cruising is alluded to in notes about his 1974/1975 work "Night Creature," in which he refers to Duke Ellington, whose music the dance is set to, and tellingly to "the people who are *themselves* at night."

Under the heading "sex," are two phone numbers. ("I called those phone numbers," Edwards said. "No one answered.")

But while the notebooks track the events of his personal life, they also contain sketches for dances and names of artists and poets. "He had a genuine curiosity," Edwards said. "The things he was reading. The regular citations of Hart Crane. Like, who would have thought? What is it about this poet that he so identified with?"

She found mentions of many artists in the notebooks, and she was especially struck by an interview in which Ailey said: "I wanted to be a painter. I wanted to be a sculptor. I wanted to write the great American novel. I wanted to be a poet. And for me, dance somehow holds all of these things."

That gave Edwards the idea to open the show up visually. Along with performance footage, recorded interviews and pieces from his personal archive, "Edges of Ailey" has sections about his influences, including

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the choreographers Katherine Dunham, Martha Graham, Jack Cole and many more. And it features works by more than 80 artists, including Barkley L. Hendricks and Rashid Johnson, to help to place Ailey in greater context while also chronicling Black creativity in the United States.

In this way, Ailey is positioned not just in the history of dance, but in the history of American culture. Edwards is telling stories from one artist, or generation, to the next: One of Johnson's first paintings from his "Anxious Men" series is placed next to Ailey's nervous breakdown notebook entry.

"The way we think about dance in relationship to modernism, in art history, they are usually sort of separate," Edwards said. "We're not doing that here."

Beyond the artwork and performance footage, the museum will host a robust series of live dancing, beginning with the Ailey company and Ailey II. There will also be new commissioned works, from the veteran choreographers Bill T. Jones and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, as well as from experimental voices including Trajal Harrell, Ralph Lemon (with the artist Kevin Beasley), Sarah Michelson and Will Rawls.

Matthew Rushing, the Ailey company's interim artistic director, will present "Sacred Songs," a new dance set to music that had to be cut from Ailey's 1960 masterpiece, "Revelations," when it was shortened for touring. Rushing's cast is made up of nonprofessional dancers — students from the Ailey Extension — and he has not needed to water down anything for them. "They have shown up in a way that I did not expect," he said. "It's inspiring me to push myself further."

Rawls spent an important summer studying at the Ailey school, though he now makes work that is largely conceptual, driven by language. "I would not be in the career that I am without Alvin Ailey having existed," he said. "I don't really see how I could have been inspired and encouraged to be a dancer, and then a choreographer, if I didn't have the example of that company."

The same is true for Harrell, who never went the Ailey route but feels "the grandeur and the burden of his accomplishment."

And the sacrifice. "I think he and Arthur Mitchell" — who formed Dance Theater of Harlem — "are part of that generation that had to prove something as Black dancers, that there was a space for them, that they *could* do dance as an art form," he added. "They had to make that space. But because that space was made, I didn't have to do it."

At the Whitney, Harrell presents a work inspired by Katherine Dunham, an important role model for Ailey. The dance, "Deathbed," is based on Harrell's memory of visiting a dying Dunham. A friend took him. Years later, while working on a series inspired by the Butoh pioneer Tatsumi Hijikata, he learned that Dunham and Hijikata had once shared a studio in Japan.

He started to wonder, How much influence did Dunham have on Hijikata and, in turn, on Butoh? Harrell's "Deathbed" is about the idea of a suspended moment, the what-ifs, the questions that were never asked, just as "Edges of Ailey" deals at times with topics little discussed.

"If I had been a little boy and I had known when I went to see that first Alvin Ailey concert that he was queer," Harrell said, "I don't know how that would change my life."

For Harrell, who comes from a tradition of post-postmodern dance, Ailey fits into modernism, but not the modernism of abstraction. The image of the Black dancer represents, he said, "an expression of feeling."

Ailey's work, he added, was "linked to this idea of Black liberation, of struggle, of trying to find a visual and physical representation."

What made Ailey different was that expressiveness: "That Ailey sparkle," Edwards said, which relates "to an insistence on entertaining or a certain kind of pleasure or a certain kind of beauty. He was totally unapologetic about it."

Edwards is not afraid of sparkle, either. She's a different kind of curator, and dance was her first art love. "I see almost everything as a performance," she said, "like the most mundane things. I'm always asking myself the question: Is something performing here? *What* is performing here?"

"Edges of Ailey" has a sense of theater, of choreography; she sees Ailey as a person that surrounded himself with a constellation of influences and wants to show that in a visceral way. "I'm not interested in walking up to a wall or looking at a work of art," Edwards said. "I'm interested in how do all these things flow together or work together or where's the edge? And how my body in that space is going to relate to the things around it. That kind of shapes or contours everything that I do as a curator."

How might an exhibition, in other words, make you feel or make you see life differently? It circles back to a line from the notebooks. Ailey writes: "We teach people to feel — to own their own feelings."



LORNA SIMPSON, VIA HAUSER & WIRTH



FRED FEHL/THE HARRY RANSOM CENTER

Top, Lorna Simpson's "Momentum" (2011), which is a two-channel video installation that is part of the Alvin Ailey exhibition at the Whitney Museum. Above, from Ailey's "Masekela Langage," as performed by his company in 1972.

FRIEZE

Carry Forward

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

October 2024

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.

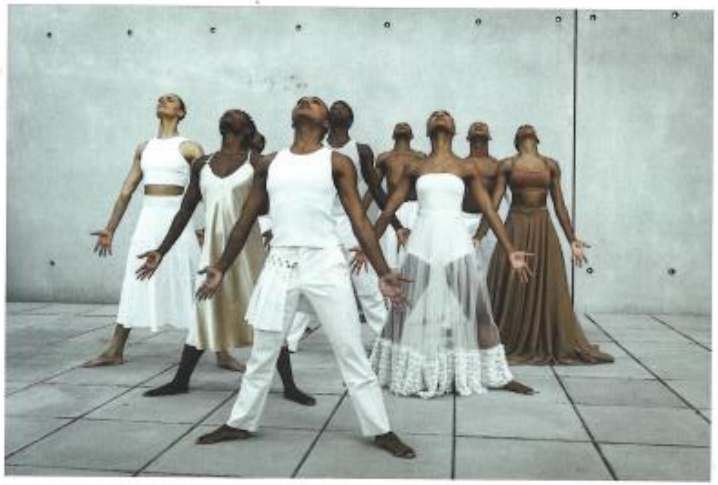


Previous page
Alvin Ailey surrounded by the Company, 1958. Courtesy: © Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, Inc. and the Smithsonian Institution; photograph: Jack Mitchell

Opposite page
Alvin Ailey and Carmen De Lavallade in *Roots of the Blues*, 1961. Courtesy: © Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, Inc. and the Smithsonian Institution; photograph: 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, aunties, 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.

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

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

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!

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.



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.

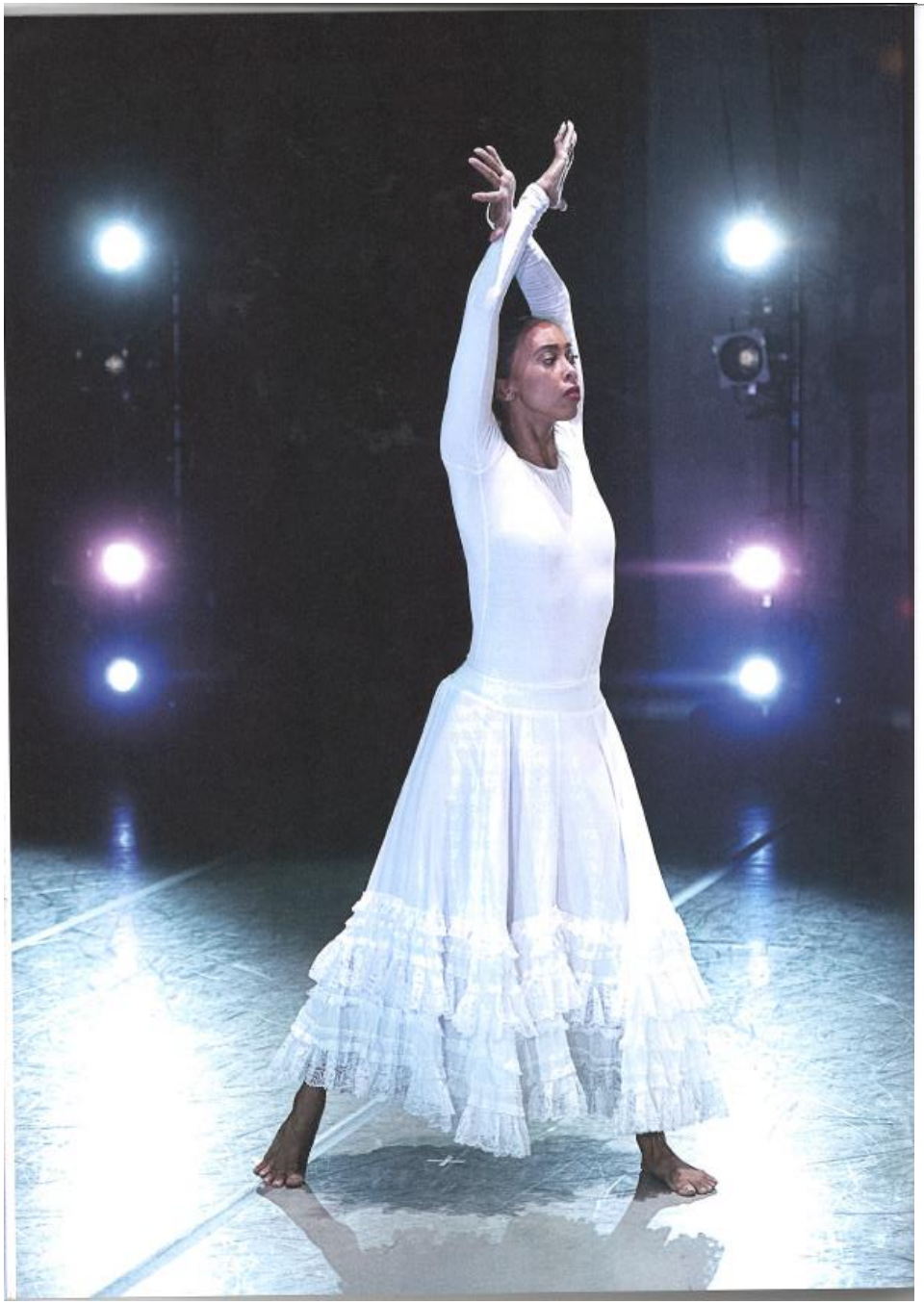
Each section is composed in a different dance idiom. We watch for their interconnected meanings. Seen literally, the movement in the finale, 'Rocka my Soul in the Bosom of Abraham', depicts (not without comedy) what it's like for a church congregation on a hot day in the American South. By this stage 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 L
Abbott in *Revel*
1964. Courtesy:
AILEY; photog
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.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

'Ailey' Review: Peeking Behind the Curtain of a Choreographer's Creative Mind

By: John Anderson

January 7, 2022 (Online 1/6/22)

TELEVISION REVIEW | JOHN ANDERSON

A Peek Behind the Curtain Of a Creative Mind

The problem with being Alvin Ailey was being Alvin Ailey. "Sometimes your name becomes bigger than yourself," says the dancer-choreographer Carmen de Lavallade of her late friend and colleague. "Alvin Ailey: Do you really know who that is, or *what* that is?" Jamila Wignot's moving and poetic documentary portrait, "Ailey," provides answers, while making clear that its subject had the same questions.

Ailey, who grew up dirt poor in Texas, the son of a nomadic single mother, became not only one of the more significant choreographers of the 20th century but a man synonymous with Black dance in America. "Did they love him, or what he represented?" asks the dancer-choreographer Bill T. Jones, echoing several of the Ailey friends and company members who appear throughout, including Judith Jamison, George Faison and Masazumi Chaya. Mr. Jones speculates that his onetime collaborator suffered the "demon" that often torments those who rise from humble origins to great heights. "If I've gotten this far," he says, rhetorically, "I must have pulled one over on somebody. And any day now, I may be found out."

Mr. Jones is probably the most eloquent and insightful of an unfailingly cogent group of interviewees who populate Ms. Wignot's film, which provides history, anecdotes and analysis about Ailey and as an "American Masters" presentation seems long overdue. Like most shows in the series, it is a tribute; unlike most, it is a gloriously expressionistic treatment of its subject. (Last summer's program about bluesman Buddy Guy took a similarly adventurous tack; perhaps it's a trend.) Ms. Wignot uses archival film in fluidly kinetic ways, deferring to Ailey's own words when she can—"Ailey" contains a trove of audio interviews that she marries to footage that is often chosen not necessarily for its historical relevance but for its energy. The New York of the late '50s, when her subject founded the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, through the late '80s, when Ailey died of complications related to AIDS, is evoked in a torrent of images that pay their own kind of homage to the palette of movement with which Ailey created his landmark dances, as well as the times he lived through. It also reflects the turmoil Ailey suffered—mentally, medically and in terms of his fame and place in Black culture.



Dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey (foreground) in a production of 'Blues Suite'

The technology is available that can make sound and picture look brand new, even if it's a half-century old—see the Beatles on Disney+. But Ms. Wignot has deliberately maintained the antique quality of much of her materials, including scratchy interviews and melty images, which not only provides ambience but helps differentiate between eras. This is particularly useful during the sequences that bookend the Ailey portrait—and occasionally interrupt it—and involve the creation of a work commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Ailey company (which took place in 2018). Robert Battle, the artistic director of the troupe, invited choreographer Rennie Harris (of the Puremovement company) to create such a work, and at the beginning of "Ailey" Mr. Harris is introduced to the young Ailey performers—through whom the new work will develop and evolve throughout the film. "We're gonna create whatever this is," Mr. Harris jokes to laughs from the dancers. "It's gotta be good." It is. And like "Ailey" itself, seems worthy of its subject.

Ailey
Tuesday, 9 p.m., PBS

The New York Times

Special Sunday Insert: Perpetual Motion

By: Zadie Smith

April 14, 2019

PERPETUAL MOTION

The photographs in this section are from The New York Times archives, which consist of some six million prints — some dating back more than 100 years. The Past Tense storytelling team chose the images from thousands of dance photos and commissioned commentary from the ballerina Misty Copeland (Pages 8-13, 44-49) and an essay from the writer Zadie Smith (Pages 28-29). Additional pictures from The Times's archives are published every day on Instagram @nytarchives.



RICHARD CORMAN/WEISS KATZ GALLERY

DON BELLAMY, KARINE PLANTADIT AND URI SANDS *ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER, 1996.*

UPLIFT!

By ZADIE SMITH

When I was about 12, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater came to town and my mother took me to see them. It was a trip for just us two, and I was a little reluctant, suspecting some species of racial uplift, which I felt I could receive far more easily by staying in my room, listening to Monie Love and watching Cameo's "Word Up" video on repeat. I was suspicious of racial uplift in general. The way it always seemed to point in the same direction, toward the supposed "higher" arts: the theater but not the television, opera singers but not beatboxers, ballet dancers but not body-poppers. No Jamaican mother ever ran into a kid's bedroom, waving a cassette, crying: "Have you heard 'Push It'? It's by some brilliant young ladies from New York!" Yet I couldn't imagine anything on the legitimate stage meaning as much to me as Salt-N-Pepa's bump and grind.

Off we went — and it was a ravishment. Nothing prepares you for the totality of Alvin Ailey: the aural, visual, physical, spiritual beauty. Up to that point, most high-culture excursions (usually school trips) had felt like sly training for a lifetime of partly satisfying adult aesthetic experiences: nice singing but absurd story, or good acting but incomprehensible 400-year-old text, and so on. To be permitted to hear the thickly stacked, honeyed gospel of "Wade in the Water," while simultaneously watching those idealized, muscular arms — in every shade of brown — slowly rise and assume the shape of so many ancient amphoras! Heaven. And then below the regality and poise of the upper body, beneath the waist, there continued the bastardized bump and grind from MTV, coming full circle to meet its call-and-response West African roots. Everywhere you looked: sensory pleasure. In place of the saccharine costume confections of "The Nutcracker," here were down-home, flowing, church-white gowns, stunning against so much shining dark skin, and redolent of the American South, a dream place I'd visited only in books and song. It dawned on me that I was watching neither high nor low culture but rather a wholly unified thing.

Ailey's all-encompassing vocabulary included the athletes from the running tracks and the fly-girls from the videos, the swaying of church ministers and the hip-switching of Caribbean dance hall and carnival. A diaspora of movement, in short. All fingertips stretched to the sky, all leaps seemed weightless, the whole logic tended upward. *"Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel well?"* asked the gospel choir, and then pushed the question further from the biblical to the political: *"Then why not every man?"* Deliverance. From shackles, from oppression, from stereotype and misidentification, from prejudice, from any form of restraint, even that proposed by gravity. Toward freedom. (I note that in the photo the minister is the only one encumbered with shoes.)

To me, all dance is a discourse on freedom, but in black dance, for obvious reasons, this discourse has been as much literal as figurative. Which fact makes it impossible not to see this photograph as history as much as choreography, although it is an image in which the "black body" is not solely a site of pain, suffering and exploitation — as it is often depicted today — but also the locus of an extraordinary joy. At the shimmering point at which archetypes ("the black body") become individuals and then icons, I spy, in this image of uplift, Bishop Richard Allen, Marsha Hunt and Joseph Cinque leaping into history, or the Rev. Al Green, Lauryn Hill and Bill T. Jones ascending toward the sublime. And each spring, now that I live in New York, I don't have to go very far at all to get another shot of Ailey's soaring delights.

AFTERWORD

Six months ago, the newly formed Past Tense team began sifting through the treasure chest that is the New York Times archives, where some six million photographs are filed away. Photographs of dance quickly emerged as one of the most enduring themes, with photos that date back more than 100 years. Most of those photos are of ordinary people, and that's what we've highlighted here: from slow dances to the Twist, from the mambo to the mosh pit. Choreographers and professional dancers, like our guest editor, Misty Copeland, are scattered throughout, in part because it's in them that we find not just the highest elevation of the form, but a metaphor for possibility that extends far beyond the realm of dance. In her essay here, the novelist Zadie Smith remembers a performance by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater from her childhood as nothing less than "a ravishment." Oprah Winfrey, talking to The Times about Ailey's company in 1996, said much the same: "It makes us feel better about ourselves, that you can live better, that you can fly." This section is devoted to the world of dancers, both off and onstage, who help keep alive that dream of flight.

VERONICA CHAMBERS, *editor, Past Tense*

THE MAGIC OF *REVELATIONS*

BY JEN PETERS

Even today, Ailey's masterpiece remains a powerful ode to the resilience of the human spirit.



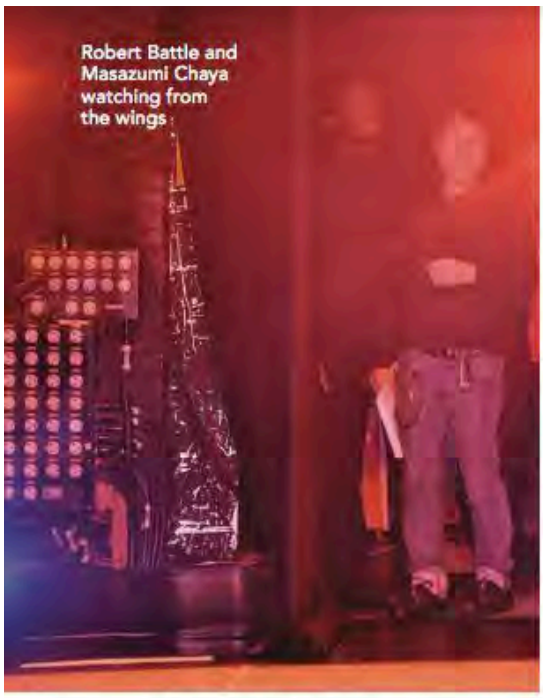
AAADT in the opening section: "I Been 'Buked"

From left: Courtesy Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation Archives; Gert Krautbauer; Courtesy AAADT

In 1960, America was in the midst of a social transformation. The Supreme Court had ruled "separate but equal" unconstitutional six years prior, but the country's response was slow and turbulent as desegregation incited violent responses. Surrounded by powerful civil rights momentum, a 29-year-old Alvin Ailey created an ode to the resilience of the human spirit: *Revelations*. "Alvin was making a statement about African-American cultural experience, saying, 'Hey, this is who we are, we live here, we were born here,' " says Judith Jamison, artistic director emerita of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. "It was a brave action. Civil rights were roaring, and our protest was our performance."

Even today, *Revelations* presents a compelling plea for society through its renderings of the highs and lows of our human condition. "When I look at recent events in this country and hear rhetoric that is more than a throwback to the Jim Crow era," says current AAADT artistic director Robert Battle, "I know that now, more than ever, *Revelations* is urgently needed."

The piece has made a profound impact. AAADT dancers perform *Revelations* hundreds, even thousands, of times in the course of their careers. Their bodies carry not only the steps, but the weight and historical relevance of the piece. "I haven't danced it in years, but I remember every step I ever learned," says Jamison, whose performances as the umbrella woman helped propel her to stardom. "You feel whole by the time the curtain comes down. No matter how many times you perform or see it, it lifts you." ▶



Robert Battle and Masazumi Chaya watching from the wings

THE BIRTH OF A MASTERWORK

While creating *Revelations*—one of his earliest works—Ailey was searching for personal, artistic and cultural identity. He investigated what he described as his ancestral "blood memories," and his personal history growing up an only child in rural segregated Texas, attending Baptist churches with his single mother, being overwhelmed by spiritual gospel music. Divided into three sections, his narrative journeys through a mournful "Pilgrim of Sorrow"; the baptismal second section, "Take Me to the Water"; and "Move Members, Move," depicting an uplifting spiritual community.

"*Revelations* began with the music. As early as I can remember I was enthralled by the music played and sung in small black churches," Ailey described in his memoir *Revelations: The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey*. He wrote that he was also stirred by the sculptures of Henry Moore, the writings of Langston Hughes, and the technical elements of Martha Graham and his mentor Lester Horton: "Moore's work inspired the costumes made of jersey in the first part. When the body moves, the jersey takes on extraordinary tensions."

The piece premiered in New York City at the 92nd Street Y on Sunday, January 31, 1960, with nine dancers including Ailey, and live musicians. "The theater was packed," recalls Sylvia Waters, a former Ailey II director, and current director of the Ailey Legacy Residency. "I was in the balcony, and when the curtain came down there was a moment of silence and then an eruption of clapping, stamping…it was huge!" The original version was a full hour, which Ailey said he then "snipped, cut, pushed and pulled down to a half hour."

THE SNAG TO SUCCESS

Reaching the pinnacle of his choreographic career early on, Ailey struggled at times with his personal relationship to *Revelations.* "He sometimes referred to *Revelations* as 'the albatross around his neck,' " says Waters. "He was frustrated, always being put in that box, because he created 79 ballets and many thought this was the only piece he ever created!"

PASSING IT ON

As *Revelations* approaches 60 years of nearly uninterrupted performances, Ailey's hopeful message continues to spread. "Alvin Ailey was able to create a work about faith in God, yet it transcends religion," says Battle. "*Revelations* has a way of breaking through spiritual and language barriers."

Battle has witnessed the passing of the torch firsthand since becoming director in 2011. "I see new dancers in their first performance, or longtime dancers moving into iconic roles—it connects them to the past, to Alvin Ailey himself. It is a powerful, moving experience," says Battle, who sometimes marks the movement in the wings to interplay with the dancers. "I never danced *Revelations* myself, so [associate artistic director Masazumi] Chaya has threatened to put me into 'yellow section' at some point…I humbly decline!" ■

Jen Peters is a frequent contributor to Dance Magazine.

MOST MEMORABLE AUDIENCE REACTIONS

"When we used to perform with live music, I remember audience members bringing tambourines and playing along. They were ready like it was church!" —**JUDITH JAMISON**

"In South Africa for the first time, we finished *Revelations* and the audience was clapping, then they started pounding their feet in unison, which we experience in Europe often. But then they started chanting something in unison, and to this day we still don't know what it was! It was a really spiritual experience." —**MATTHEW RUSHING**

"Once, in Germany, we had already gone offstage and into our dressing rooms. I was about to take my eyelashes off, but the audience kept going, so Mr. Ailey had us do an encore, and all the bows, several times. They closed the curtain, they opened it again—it went on for 15, maybe 20 minutes. We finally put our heads in our hands, like 'We are tired.' They had to lower the metal fire curtain!"
—**JUDITH JAMISON**



The "yellow section"

REVELATIONS AS TEACHER

Over the years, the piece has become a powerful teaching tool. Ailey's Arts in Education & Community Programs created a children's school residency, *Revelations:* An Interdisciplinary Approach. Aimed at grades 6–8, the program uses Ailey's life and *Revelations* to tie dance to language arts, social studies and even math through phrasing and counting. It also teaches movement from "I Been 'Buked," "Rocka My Soul" and sometimes "Wade in the Water."

"We examine the decade of 1960 to 1970, look at American history, world history, ask students to interview family members about their personal history," explains Nasha Thomas, who runs the program. "They write and share stories. They like seeing how much they may have in common with Mr. Ailey." —*JP*

From top: Michael Francis McBride, Courtesy AAADT; Gert Kraaibeek, Courtesy AAADT



Linda Celeste Sims and Glenn Allen Sims in "Fix Me, Jesus"

WHEN JUDITH JAMISON GOT "DEMOTED"

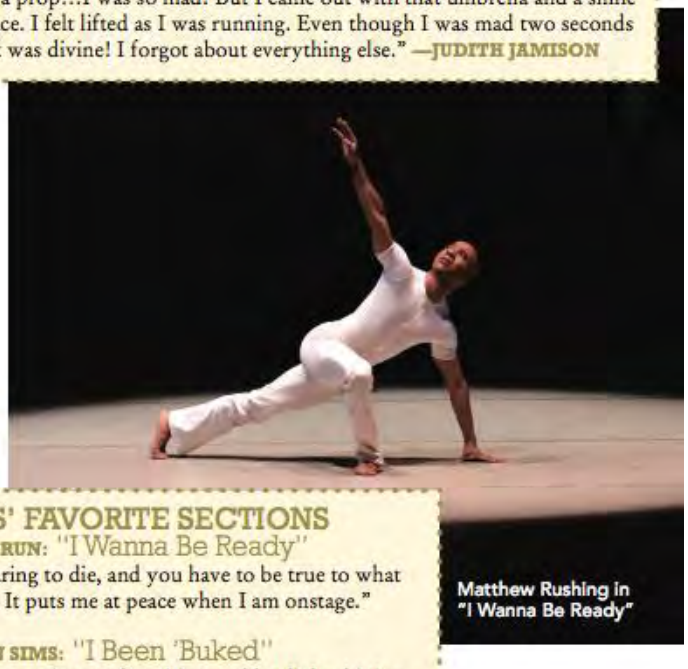
"The first two and a half years my favorite section was 'Fix Me, Jesus,' with Jimmy Truitte. Then Consuelo Atlas came along and was the first person to go past the T and into an arch, but I couldn't do that, so I got 'demoted' to carrying a prop…I was so mad! But I came out with that umbrella and a smile on my face. I felt lifted as I was running. Even though I was mad two seconds before, it was divine! I forgot about everything else." —JUDITH JAMISON

THE PRE-*REVELATIONS* RITUAL

"Before the curtain rises, everyone in 'I Been 'Buked' takes hands. We come together, heads bowed, and focus. It really is beautiful. Right when the curtain goes up we release hands and heads go heavenward."
—MATTHEW RUSHING



Jacqueline Green as the umbrella woman



Matthew Rushing in "I Wanna Be Ready"

DANCERS' FAVORITE SECTIONS

YANNICK LEBRUN: "I Wanna Be Ready"
"You are preparing to die, and you have to be true to what the emotion is. It puts me at peace when I am onstage."

GLENN ALLEN SIMS: "I Been 'Buked"
"Feet planted in semi second position, golden light shining down on you; it is totally overwhelming. I get goosebumps just thinking about the vulnerability."

JACQUELINE GREEN: Umbrella Woman
"When she comes out, it is the first glimpse of joy. You have to embody it, see it in your run."