

**This article has been translated from Spanish to English.*



ALVIN AILEY: THE BODY AS LANGUAGE

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What lies behind the bodies of a male and female dancer from one of the most influential companies in international dance? To mark the arrival of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at the Teatro Real in Madrid from October 14 to 18, Kmon Magazine speaks with two of its performers to discover what happens beyond the stage: how the body is prepared, how different choreographic languages are approached, what sustains confidence in a pas de deux, and how a dancer can adapt to different styles without losing their own identity. Hannah Alissa Richardson and Christopher Wilson also share their perspectives on Alvin Ailey's legacy, representation and cultural diversity in dance, the importance of interpretation versus technique, and what they consider essential for those who dream of becoming professional dancers. Two different perspectives from within a great company. Two experiences that converge on a fundamental idea: technique prepares the body, but it is humanity, intention, emotion, and the ability to tell a story that transform movement into art.



Hannah Alissa Richardson joined Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 2022, after completing a season with Ailey II and graduating with honors from The Ailey School's certification program.

The New York Times highlighted her stage presence and described her performance in Jamar Roberts' *Al-Andalus Blues* as "captivating." Her career has also been covered by The Globe and Mail, CTV, and CBC Radio, especially following her return to Toronto to

fulfill her dream of performing with the company in her hometown.

She recently performed a segment from *Revelations* on the Tamron Hall program and was one of the dancers selected to participate alongside multi-Grammy®-winning rapper Future in *DS2: REMIXED: THE BALLET*. She has worked in works by choreographers such as Ray Mercer, Bradley Shelver, Kirven Douthit-Boyd, Earl Mosley, William Forsythe, and Robert Battle.

She has also participated in festivals such as Jacob's Pillow and Holland Dance Festival, been a guest artist with Ronald K. Brown's *Evidence*, A Dance Company, and performed in the world premiere of *Grace and Mercy* at Bard's SummerScape. Allure highlighted her makeup and hair care routine for the stage.

She also works as a model and actress and has appeared on Orion Pictures' *Every Day* and Disney Channel's *Backstage*. A passionate baker, she enjoys trying new recipes and is known for her banana bread. She grew up playing the alto saxophone and clarinet and is currently teaching herself to play the piano and ukulele.

Christopher R. Wilson graduated cum laude from the Ailey/Fordham BFA Dance program and joined Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in the 2018 season at Lincoln Center.

The New York Times praised his performance of the solo "I Wanna Be Ready" from *Revelations* as one of the best and most complete recent versions. He also trained at the Colton Ballet School, Alonzo King LINES Ballet, and The School at Jacob's Pillow.



He began her professional career at BH dos, the second company of Ballet Hispánico, before joining Ailey II in 2016. He has performed as a guest artist with The Black Iris Project and participated in the World Monuments Fund's Hadrian Gala, in honor of Queen Sofia of Spain, and in the 2017 Essence Festival in New Orleans.



The Fordham Observer reviewed her journey from the Ailey/Fordham BFA program to joining the company. He has also spoken on ATL Live and CBS News Atlanta about the excitement of performing on the same stage where, as a student, she first saw Ailey.

Outside of dance, he's passionate about sneakers and sports, especially college football. He also enjoys traveling and creating videos.

The body and the technique

Question: What is a typical training day like at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater?

Hannah Alissa Richardson

As we're currently on tour, I'll give you a little insight into what a typical day is like for us while we're on the road. A normal day starts with a good, delicious breakfast. We usually have a short break before getting ready and heading to the theater for rehearsals. We typically rehearse the pieces with the cast that will be performing that week. After a quick bite to eat, we have company class, which is usually ballet taught by a guest teacher from the city we're visiting. We're always very lucky to have wonderful guest teachers join us along the way. Then comes hair, makeup, costumes, and... showtime! The curtain falls, we eat, sleep, and do it all again!

Christopher Wilson

Our days as Ailey dancers can vary greatly depending on the time of year. When we're in rehearsal in New York, our workdays are Monday through Friday and begin around 10:30 a.m. with a company warm-up class. Our rehearsals are from 12:00 to 19:00, with an hour for lunch from 15:00 to 16:00. As most of our rehearsals are concentrated during the summer, it's nice to have weekends free to enjoy life and the good weather.

Q. What disciplines are part of your daily training?

Hannah Alissa Richardson

Our daily training is quite diverse, and I think that's one of the things that makes being an Ailey dancer so special. Ballet is a big part of our training, but we also incorporate modern and contemporary techniques, as well as strength and conditioning work to keep our bodies strong and ready for the demands of the repertoire. Because our repertoire is so diverse, we constantly work on different qualities of movement, musicality, coordination, and ways of using the body. Each choreographer and each piece demands something different from us, so our training is really about staying versatile, adaptable, and ready for whatever comes next.



Christopher Wilson

My daily workout varies from day to day. I do strength training at the gym two to three times a week. I do yoga or Pilates once or twice a week. I do these activities along with a dance warm-up —ballet, modern and contemporary— every day.

Q. Which parts of the body require special attention in order to perform this type of movement safely and efficiently?

Hannah Alissa Richardson

Our body is truly our instrument, a well-oiled machine. Every part of it is important for us to function safely and efficiently, from the top of our head to the tips of our toes. We need to be mindful of how we care for and use each part of our body. But, beyond the physical, I believe that another part of our body that requires special attention is our mind and our mental health. If our mental state is unbalanced, it can affect everything else, including how we move, act, and connect with work. Taking care of our mind is just as important as taking care of our body.



Christopher Wilson

Personally, my back and core require special attention. I have hypermobility in those areas, so they need greater awareness and strengthening, especially when it comes to lifting and partner work

Q. How do you work on strength and mobility without letting physical training limit artistic freedom?

Hannah Alissa Richardson

Like professional athletes, dance and the performing arts require strength, conditioning, endurance, and recovery, and even more. While dance naturally develops our strength and flexibility, additional training is necessary to perform at the level we do. Cross-training is very important. Many dancers have their own ways of supplementing their training, from Gyrotonic, Pilates, and hot yoga to weightlifting, swimming, and cardio. I believe that finding what works best for your own body is essential. For me, that consists of company class, Pilates, and hot yoga, in addition to being consistent with my physical therapy exercises.



I believe that maintaining my strength and mobility outside the studio actually gives me more freedom as an artist. When my body feels strong, supported, and prepared, I can focus less on the physical demands and more on the artistic aspects, the musicality, and the intention behind the movement.



Christopher Wilson

I've discovered that strength training has actually given me greater artistic freedom. I feel more connected to my body and have developed greater confidence in its ability to withstand extreme physical demands. This has also brought me the freedom to focus on quality and intention, knowing that I have a more solid foundation from which to grow.

5. What aspects of training do you consider fundamental to keeping the body prepared to face different choreographic languages?

Hannah Alissa Richardson

Mr. Ailey always dreamed of having a company that was versatile in all styles and genres of dance. For me, what has helped me the most has been the variety of training I had before joining the company. I grew up in the world of competitive dance, training in jazz, tap, acrobatics, ballet, hip-hop, musical theater, and contemporary. This provided me with the tools I needed to finally audition and be accepted into The Ailey School, where I was able to continue expanding my repertoire of tools by delving into the world of Horton-based modern dance, Graham-based modern dance, jazz, Dunham, singing for dancers, and much more. Having this diverse training has allowed me to develop a versatile body and a broader understanding of movement. All of these tools have helped prepare me to tackle the diverse repertoire and choreographic styles we perform within the company.

Christopher Wilson

I refer to the combination of strength and mobility as "elasticity": the ability to take the body to its extremes while possessing the strength to shorten and contract the movement when necessary. All of this is necessary for our profession.

Q. If you had to explain to a dance student the fundamental characteristics of Alvin Ailey's language, what elements would you highlight?

Hannah Alissa Richardson

I would emphasize to the student that modern dance, jazz, and ballet are fundamental to Mr. Ailey's style. That said, for me, the heart of his work lies in the quality of his performance and his storytelling. Mr. Ailey had a unique ability to evoke emotion in people. Without the artistry and narrative behind the movement, it can simply become steps on a stage. It is emotion, intention, and story that bring movement to life.



Christopher Wilson

Humanity is at the heart of all of Mr. Ailey's choreography. Although the movement can sometimes be superhuman, his mission has always been "to hold up a mirror to society and show it how beautiful it is."



Q. To a dance student observing you from the outside, your level might seem unattainable. If you had to point to one quality that a young dancer should start cultivating today to become a good company performer (beyond flexibility, turns, or jumps), what would it be and why?

Hannah Alissa Richardson

There's a phrase that Ronald K. Brown, Grace's choreographer, always said: "Fall in love with hard work." Because, ultimately, even though our job is to make dancing look easy on stage, being an artist is a lifestyle and requires a lot of work. Once that clicks,

everything goes smoothly. Keep pushing yourself, keep training, and most importantly, keep enjoying the process. The journey is just as important as the destination.

Christopher Wilson

The ability to communicate and tell a story through movement is an essential quality for a professional dancer. Although dance is a visual medium, it is storytelling and emotion that transform it into art. The performer and the creative process

Q. The company performs Alvin Ailey's historical repertoire alongside works by choreographers such as Medhi Walewski, Judith Jamison, Lar Lubovitch, and Jamar Roberts. How does your body language change when moving from one work to another without losing your identity as performers?

Hannah Alissa Richardson

Changing our body language to adapt to all the different styles and stories that each choreographer brings to the room, without losing our identity as performers, begins in the studio during rehearsals. Through the rehearsal process we have the opportunity to practice, learn more deeply about the story and understand the intention behind each piece. We also work closely with our wonderful artistic team, who help guide us and ensure that we bring the choreographer's vision to life, while allowing our own individuality to shine through. I believe the key is finding the balance between fully embodying the choreographer's world and contributing our own truth and our own artistic language.

Christopher Wilson

One of the keys to interpreting works by so many different choreographers is the ability to adapt to their structure. I imagine it like a drawing: the choreographer sketches the image and provides the dancer with the tools and instructions to color the rest.

The way a dancer colors their movement is based on their own perspective and humanity: the qualities that make us all unique.

Q. When you see a movement for the first time, what happens in your body and mind to go from "seeing a step" to truly making it your own?

Hannah Alissa Richardson

I think one of the first things that comes to mind is, "Oooh, let's give it a try!" Then I let my body and experience take over. I try not to overthink it and instead allow my body to respond, trusting the training and experience I've built up over the years to guide me.



Christopher Wilson

When I learn a new choreography, I have to keep trying it over and over so my brain can retain it and I can feel confident. Once I reach a certain level of confidence with the sequence, I can start to make the movement my own and explore more artistic possibilities.

Q. What is the difference between being physically prepared and being prepared as an interpreter?

Hannah Alissa Richardson

I believe that being physically prepared gives you the strength, technique, stamina, and control needed to execute the movement safely and efficiently. But being prepared as a performer means knowing how to take those physical tools and turn them into something meaningful. As dancers, we don't just execute steps; we are storytellers. Technique provides the foundation, but it is artistry, intention, and emotion that bring movement to life.



Christopher Wilson

Much attention is paid to the physical aspect of dance—and understandably so. Dancers are constantly asked to do superhuman and unnatural things with their bodies. While these actions are impressive in themselves, it is the ability to touch the heart and tell stories that takes dance beyond the physical realm, into an emotional and spiritual space.

Q. In a pas de deux, the audience usually focuses on the lifts or the most risky moments. But, from the inside, what less visible elements truly sustain the trust and connection between two performers?



Hannah Alissa Richardson

Oh, I really like this question! From a technical point of view, a pas de deux involves a lot of weight shifting, giving and receiving, and communication. Both dancers have to meet halfway to be able to execute the movement fluidly. Breathing is also very important. Breathing together can truly unite dancers in a pas de deux. And finally, eye contact creates a connection between the dancers and allows them to communicate without saying a word. These small, almost invisible moments are what build trust and make the couple feel truly connected. For me, two important elements of partner work are how we breathe together and how we understand each other's bodies. Breath is our life force and an essential part of dance. When you work

with someone in such a physical and intimate way, it is essential that your breathing is connected to ensure that you move in unison. Understanding your partner's body is equally important. It's very common for couples to change.

Are there differences in how each person prefers to be held? Do they have optimal angles they prefer to show? How do proportions change from one person to another? All of this is fundamental to trust and connection.

Alvin Ailey: History, Identity, and Legacy

Father Alvin Ailey created a space where the African American experience could be expressed through dance. How do you understand that dimension of his legacy today?

Hannah Alissa Richardson

Mr. Ailey was ahead of his time. He created a beautiful foundation on which the dancers could be seen and the human experience could be felt. Her work continues to create a space for stories, cultures, and experiences to be shared through movement and to connect people from different backgrounds. I am very grateful for their vision and being a part of it is a great honor.

Christopher Wilson

Mr. Ailey's legacy resonates with me because much of his story parallels my own. I, too, am a Black man from the American South, raised by a single mother in the Baptist Church. And although there are undoubtedly experiences in his life that I may never live, I have always seen myself reflected in that mirror that he wanted to show to society.



Dance in today's world and cultural diversity

Q. The company was founded at a historical moment when opportunities for African American dancers were much more limited. What has changed since then in the professional world of dance, and what challenges do you think still exist?

Hannah Alissa Richardson

I believe there is definitely more accessibility and more opportunities for dancers from diverse backgrounds than when Mr. Ailey founded the company. There are more spaces for dancers to train, perform, and develop a professional career. I believe the challenge now is to continue creating those opportunities and ensuring that dancers from all backgrounds feel they have a place in the professional dance world. Mr. Ailey opened many doors and I believe it is important that we continue to open even more.

Christopher Wilson

Since Ailey was founded, many more spaces have been created that celebrate and value the Black and African American experience: Dance Theatre of Harlem, Dallas Black Dance Theater, and others. Although important and necessary progress has been made in this area, these spaces are often underfunded and do not receive as broad a platform as their historically exclusive, white, and Eurocentric counterparts.

Tips for the new generation of dancers

Q. If you could speak to a 15 or 16-year-old student who dreams of becoming a professional dancer, what would you tell them? To start working now.

Hannah Alissa Richardson

Mrs. Ronni Favors, our former rehearsal director, always told us to be "a sponge". What she meant was that we should absorb EVERYTHING. Everything you see, hear, and feel. Whether it comes from your teacher at the front of the room or simply from your classmates, absorb all the information you can and add it to your knowledge toolbox. I would also say never forget the reason you started dancing in the first place. Living the life of an artist can be difficult at times, but if you can remember your "why," it will help keep you grounded and keep moving forward. Oh, and yes... drink more water!

Christopher Wilson

When young dancers enter the pre-professional stage of their career or training, it is essential that they begin to explore their own individuality. We all work constantly to achieve a more refined technique, greater flexibility, more strength, and much more. However, the true mark of an artist is the ability to showcase their own unique qualities in a room where there is little or no difference in terms of physical capabilities.

Q. What skills, not necessarily taught in a technique class, have you had to develop throughout your career?

Hannah Alissa Richardson

Perseverance. A career in dance comes with many highs and lows, and learning to keep going through both has been one of the most important skills I've developed. There will be times when things don't go as planned, but learning to keep showing up, keep working, and keep believing in yourself is what keeps you moving forward.

Christopher Wilson

I have learned so much about how to take care of my body since I started my professional career. At first I had to deal with several injuries that forced me to seek professional guidance. I spent more time with physical therapists, started cross-training, and essentially had to relearn many of the ways I approached movement. Understanding my body better has given me the ability to focus more on my artistic imagination.

Q. The Teatro Real is one of the most iconic stages in the world. What does it mean for you to perform in a space with such a rich history, and what kind of relationship do you hope to establish with the Madrid audience through your program?

Hannah Alissa Richardson

It is a great honor to perform in a theater with so much history and significance. More than anything, I hope that the Madrid audience will be moved and inspired by what they see. I hope that you connect with the stories we are telling, that you feel something deeply, and that you leave the theater carrying a small fragment of the experience with you.

Christopher Wilson

I love performing in historical spaces. One of the most fascinating aspects is seeing all the artists who have previously passed through them, those I know and those I don't. I know it's been many years since Ailey last performed in Spain and I'm really looking forward to bringing Ailey's spirit to the Madrid audience. I hope they leave the performances feeling uplifted and inspired, and I hope we can come back soon to reconnect with them.