

ALVIN AILEY

a revolutionary in dance

*A historical and biographical sketch
of his choreographic works.*

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Alvin Ailey (Jnr.) has been described as neither a modern dancer nor a Negro dancer but a Negro-Modern dancer.¹ Perhaps this can be explained in the way he blends the strong modern dance background he had with his black heritage, notably Jazz. So expertly does he do this that:

The more one sees of Ailey's choreography the more one admires it, the more it seems to grow on you... You watch Revelation and it appears to be such a natural extension of the music that hardly a sense of 'choreography stands between the natural-moving dancers and the music, but later watching it again and again' one begins to see the craft that has gone to gild nature.²

His approach to dance bore a close affinity with the African conception of dance as a many faceted entity. Alvin's dance programme presentations offered breadth and variety just as a music or concert conductor would present at a given musical concert. And this was at a time when dance audiences tended to favour, a Jose Simon, Weidman, Martha Graham or Katherine Dunham technique.

Like an African dancer he could relate to other forms and find inspiration, insight and excitement for study, enjoyment or experimentation.

Alvin Ailey was born in Rogers, Texas, on January 5, 1931. His labourer father, Alvin E. Cliff Ailey and his mother, Lula, separated when young Ailey was only a child. Living with his mother most of the time, Alvin Ailey was very much influenced by the rituals of the Baptist Church and the beauty of the Blues in the poverty-stricken area where they lived.

His love for dance did not manifest itself until he moved with his mother to Los Angeles, California, where he came into contact with the techniques of Lester Horton, one of the first modern dancers who captured the West Coast of America. Alvin Ailey enrolled in Lester's Technique class, only to quit after a short time even though he was being supported financially by Horton. He enrolled as a Spanish Language major at the University of California (U.C.L.A.) and after two years of college, decided dance was his language. He went back to Horton in 1949 to become a member of the company's chorus and stage-crew.

Alvin Ailey's debut as a dancer took place four years later when he performed in the revue *Bal Caribe*. 1953 may be considered the turning-point in Ailey's career as a dancer and choreographer. Four years after he had started his dance career with Horton, Ailey was entrusted with the fate of the company at the death of Horton in 1953; after justifying his ability to choreograph and handle people with two scenarios *St. Francis of Assisi* and

Morning Mourning. The company's invitation to perform at Jacobs Pillow the following year and the subsequent offers Ailey himself got from dance companies and movie makers to choreograph and dance were clear indications that, even though he was very young in the modern dance world, he was beginning to make an impact not only in the dance world but also in the related areas.

With the Horton Dance Theatre, Alvin Ailey taught and also directed the Horton's Children's Theatre. He was quite busy at this time. He choreographed and presented a group dance on the *Creation of the World* by Milhaud with music by the San Diego Symphony Orchestra. This was around the same time he was having his first ever dancing role in the film *Carmen Jones*. In 1954, Ailey was invited to New York by Herbert Ross to appear together with Carmen de Lavallade, also a pupil of Horton, in the Broadway production of the musical *House of Flowers*. This opened the gate for him to enter into the dancing world of such celebrated modern dancers as Anna Sokolow, Doris Humphrey, Martha Graham, Charles Weidman. He also studied ballet with Karel Shook.

Before the end of 1957, Ailey had danced and appeared with Anna Sokolow, Sophia Maslow, Donald MacKayle, and Harry Belafonte. It got to a point when Alvin felt it was about time he formed his own dance company. So in the early part of 1958, the *Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre* was formed; in December that same year, the company gave its first full scale concert at the YMHA. The programme included *Cinco Latinos*, *Blues Suite*, and *Ariette Oubliee*. This programme was followed in the fall of 1960 by what was to be the beginning of what John Butler saw as *unusual for a modern dance company including the works of other choreographers in its repertoire*.³ This broke ... *the policy of one-man's company - an egocentric fault that has in the past marred many dance companies both modern and ballet*.⁴

On the programme for this historical performance were Lester Horton's *The Beloved*, *Portrait of Billie* by John Butler. Hitherto the company had performed works like *Rooms* by Anna Sokolow, *Lament* by Louis Johnson, *Oronzo Dedication* by Lester Horton, and works of Talley Beatty, Geoffrey Holder, and Paul Sansardo.

Alvin Ailey, well read and highly sophisticated, was usually always ready to learn something new and ready to share what he had with others. This influenced his company members. A London critic once wrote, *Ailey is the most generous of artists and his desire seems always to give, to share. Anything the company had with them they would show to people who cared; they wanted to share their technical skills as well and, in return eagerly learned what they could*.!!⁵

After seeing a performance by the Ghana Dance Ensemble in 1967, Mr. Ailey was very much impressed and wanted to express it in a more positive way than a staged performance. Characteristically, he offered to share his dance experience with this young African Dance Company. In the process of taking a two-hour class, he said afterwards, he had been highly impressed with the speed with which these young dancers adapted to fresh and new movement ideas and forms other than their own African experience. He tried some of the movements from the dancers of a traditional dance group to the surprise and delight of his newly found friends.

Alvin Ailey distinguished himself as a dancer, choreographer, and as a man of the people. As a dancer, he was in tune with his body, mind and soul. Doris Hering described him as ... *exceptional. He reminds one of a caged lion full of lasting power that can be released at will*.⁶ This is so true; seeing Alvin Ailey dance, myself, I got the impression that the stage was his world and movement was his life and he had a firm control of the two. Arthur Todd has this to say about him: *Alvin Ailey has mastered all the techniques and*

*virtuosity one can wish. He moves with a personal magnificence that in breathtaking and, for many, is the greatest male dancer in his field today.*⁷ Alvin danced with his company until 1965, when he decided to devote his time to choreography and the direction of the company.

In February 1962, under the sponsorship and administration of the State Department and A.N.T.A., respectively, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre made a thirteen-week tour of the Far East. In Australia the company proved that dance was really an *international language*, for, as was reported, the company was so eloquent in the language of dance that it *created a tornado of clapping, stamping, and cheering. The audience, uninhibited as the dancers on stage, would not let go.*⁸ Just after this tour, Ailey choreographed *Feast of Ashes* for the *Harkness Ballet*. This piece which made Ailey the first choreographer to blend classical ballet with modern dance,⁹ was originally intended for the Robert Joffrey Ballet. The company toured the United States extensively until September, 1964, when it set off on its second international tour - its first in Europe. The outcome of this tour, mainly in Hamburg, London, and Paris, was *perhaps the greatest sensation on the continent since Jerome Robbins Ballet USA in 1956.*¹⁰

The company's second tour of Europe took place in February, 1966. In April of the same year, a wish was partly fulfilled for Alvin Ailey when he took his company to Dakar, Senegal to perform at the Negro Arts Festival at the Negritude Exposition. This wish was fully realised in 1967 when the company toured nine African countries including Ghana. Ailey considered this tour to Africa - source of his basic material Jazz - as a *cultural coup* because it was not only the most rewarding part of the tour to be among Africans but, as he put it, *I came home with a healthy respect for my African heritage. Just as Africans have distorted views of American life, we too - Negroes and Whites alike - have a distorted view of them.*¹¹

Having had first-hand experience with both the African life and the American life, Alvin Ailey stood as a unique choreographer *who took source materials and turned them into theatre work of extra-ordinary beauty and excitement.*¹² He believed in the combination of all dance forms - jazz, ballet, modern, etc. - with instrumental music, song and acting. He also expressed many dramatic themes and moods in the 'theatre' he was dreaming of - this is the African way. Ailey was able to achieve this aim by passing these elements through the furnace of modern dance.¹³ His extraordinary piece of all times, *Revelations*, clearly demonstrates this idea. *Revelations* is a dance in which a whole religious experience is enacted in three parts - *Pilgrim of Sorrow*, *Take me to the Water*, and *Move, members, Move*. Man has reached the summit of his sins and his cup is overflowing with misery. He tries desperately to be forgiven but forgetting the important fact that he has to be cleansed, as the Bible says, he has to *be born again*. Salvation finally comes when he hears of the holy words of God and he (the sinner) gives himself up to be baptized in the River Jordan. In his happiness and gratitude to God, he sings and dances to express that sentiment.

Alvin Ailey choreographically set the first part, *Pilgrim of Sorrow*, to show how man tries fruitlessly to run away from his sins by spinning his dancers to the four corners of the stage - the four cardinal points of the earth. To show the unbearable situation in which the sinner is, he has the dancers fan themselves while waiting to be saved. The second act, *Take me to the Water*, River Jordan, in which the ritual of forgiveness is performed, is created by simply waving long strands of white cloth and as the dancers move, the holy water - River Jordan - flows continuously into new life. The emancipation from the fires of Hell in the third act, *Move, Members, Move*, is celebrated with movements which seem more improvised¹⁴ than choreographed, yet so blended with the music of the spirituals that one can almost see

the music and hear the dance.

The Hermit Songs, Alvin Ailey's best solo piece, has the same approach, but unlike **Revelations**, he used more abstract movements in this piece. Another difference between the two works is the position of the main character. In **The Hermit Songs**, Ailey carves out not a sinner but a monk - a saint who goes through self-judgement and consequent self-flagellation for his sinful past, while in **Revelations**, the sinner, less concerned with the sins he has committed, waits for God to judge him. **The Hermit Songs** maybe said to be a reflection of Alvin Ailey's life. No wonder he created it for himself. The only dancer known to have performed this solo successfully and convincingly as Ailey was William Louther, a member of Ailey's company and a former pupil of Lester Horton. The role, apart from being one of the most arduous solos in the company's repertoire then also demands a great deal of technical ability and a strong conviction of the performer.

Alvin Ailey might not have read Bertold Brecht at the time he was choreographing **The Hermit Songs**, but a London critic, Noel Goodwin, looked at the religious role the monk plays in the piece and wrote: *The manner in which Ailey makes us stand aside and watch his character comment, as it were, on his character, is almost Brechtian. He is not showing a man of God but a man in relation to God and the result is most intriguing ... The Hermit is possessed not by God but by His own vision of God.*¹⁵

The immensity of the communicative value and for that matter, the educative value of Alvin Ailey's works are unequalled. He related the history of an oppressed people of the world in **Been Here and Gone**, and the **Root of the Blues**, and explained the sharp militant and political reaction of the oppressed in **Masekela Language**. Though many people would naturally expect these works, particularly the latter, to deal directly with the American blacks, *characteristically for Mr. Ailey, however, its framework and message are universal rather than specific in a sectarian way. It may be about blacks. It maybe about whites. It is political in a non-political manner.*¹⁶ Perhaps this is why more people have seen Alvin Ailey Dance Company than any other American Dance Company.¹⁷

Another area in which Ailey worked was the idea of having a multi-racial dance company. Explaining his concept of multi-racism, Ailey said, *A multi-racial company that makes a connection with the American dance, past and future, and very strongly, with the Black past and future. But I am tired of the idea of segregated companies.*¹⁸

He did not express this idea theoretically. **Time** magazine observed this and wrote, *Ailey Company is perhaps the most thoroughly integrated ensemble in all the American performing arts - stylistically as well as racially.*¹⁹

Until February, 1974, Alvin Ailey's company had been facing financial problems - a disease which has been plaguing many dance companies especially modern dance companies. In what was termed *the bargain of the Century*, the company was awarded an amount of thirty-five thousand dollars (\$35,000) by the New York City Parks Administration to perform five concerts in five locations around the city during the 1974 summer session.²⁰ This amount was believed at the time to be the largest allocation ever to be given to a single dance company by the US Administration.

To many, nothing could be more appropriate to show the position held by this wonderful company in the dance world than the words expressed by Mr. Edwin L. Weisl, Jr., of Parks Administration, that

*... for New York to lose Alvin Ailey would be a lot more serious than it would be for it to lose one of its treasured landmarks...*²¹

New York did lose Alvin Ailey when he passed away in 1989 and left a treasured landmark of dance innovations for New York and the world.

To Africans who knew him in America where he was struggling for recognition with performances at the "Y", he represented courage and faith in his ultimate success. During his tours in Ghana, he revealed a kinsmanship-relationship between the American Blacks and the Black Africans and strengthened the bonds of brotherhood rooted in a common heritage.

One work which is still remembered featured the great dancer Judith Jamison who incidentally is directing the company at the moment after Ailey's death in dances based on the Blues and Jazz, at once gay, colourful and captivating in which umbrellas and ribbons formed part of the creative effort and not just as props. Spiritually these dances found ready response in the audience who applauded and cheered the performers. One felt proud to share a common heritage with this great artist whose belief in the brotherhood of all mankind and a non-racial world was portrayed in his Dance creations, as an article of faith and a message to the world at large. He never forgot a face. He has left us a rich heritage of inspired and inspiring works by which we shall remember him.

FOOTNOTE

- 1) William, Peter. *Blues and all that Jazz*
Dance and Dancers. Vol. 15, No. 11 (November 1964), page 25.
- 2) Barnes, Clive. *Second Time round for Ailey Dance and Dancers*. Vol. 16, No. 6 (June 1965) page 33.
- 3) Moritz, Charles. *Current Biography*. New York: The Wilson W. Co., 1968, page 13. *Dancing Times*. Vol. 55, No. 656 (May 1965), page 397.
- 5) Clark, Mary. *Ailey's Other Programme* *Dancing Times*. Vol. 55, No. 651 (December 1965), page 126
- 6) Lynne, Gauley Emery. *Black Dance*. Brooklyn New York. National Press Books (1980), page 273.
- 7) *Ibid*.
- 8) Moritz, page 14.
- 9) Time Magazine, February 26, 1973. page 67.
- 10) Moritz, page 14.
- 11) Ailey, Alvin. *African Odyssey Dance Magazine*. Vol. 42, No. 5 (November 1968), page 87.
- 12) Manchester, P.W. *Alvin Ailey Dancing Times*. Vol. LV, No. 649 (January 1964), page 87.
- 13) Peter, page 25.
- 14) Barnes, page 33.
- 15) *Ibid*
- 16) Emery, page 276
- 17) *Ibid.*, page 272.
- 18) Baker, Robb. *Black Dance - Seventies: Two Directors After Dark*. Vol. 6, No. 10 (February 1974), page 62.
- 19) *Music and Dance Time Magazine*. (February 1973), page 66.
- 20) Weisl, Edwin L. Jr. *Dance Magazine*. Vol. XLVIII, No. 4 (April 1974), page 3.
- 21) *Ibid*.

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