**Ailey, Alvin (b. 5 January 1931, Rogers, Texas; d. 1 December 1989 in New York City)**

**Summary**

Alvin Ailey counts among the most significant American choreographers of the second half of the twentieth century, and his company the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) as one of the most widely known companies both nationally and internationally. Initially established in 1958 as a small pick-up company of black dancers, AAADT quickly developed into a multiracial company that not only served as a platform for Ailey’s works but also became a repository for works by many different choreographers in a wide variety of styles. Communicating to a broad audience base, Ailey made the black dancing body integral to modern dance. In the tradition of the Lester Horton Dance Theater, Ailey stressed ethnic diversity and a broad artistic range. AAADT remains a primarily black yet multiracial company that continues the heritage of American modern dance while preserving the uniqueness of the African-American cultural experience.

**Training and Early Career**

At age twelve Ailey moved with his mother from Texas to Los Angeles. There he saw performances by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and the Katherine Dunham Dance Company that inspired him to dance. He started his formal training in 1949 at the Lester Horton Dance Theater and, like all students at the Horton studio, he learned about theatre production and design along with dance technique and composition. He joined the company in 1951 and choreographed his first work two years later, a solo titled *Afternoon Blues* (1953) that was inspired by Vaslav Nijinsky’s *Afternoon of a Faun*. A few months later Horton died suddenly, and the troupe turned to Ailey to take his place. Thus he created his first group works in quick succession in 1954—*According to St. Francis*, *Morning Mourning*, and *La Creation du* *Monde* (*Creation of the World*). From his experience with Lester Horton, Ailey took a foundational movement technique, a theatrical approach to choreography, and a commitment to a multiracial school and company.

In 1954 Ailey moved to New York to appear in the Broadway musical, *House* *of Flowers.* Partnering Carmen de Lavallade, Ailey met the many talented black dancers in the cast, including Geoffrey Holder and Arthur Mitchell. After the show closed, he remained in New York, studying acting with Stella Adler and ballet with Karel Shook, sampling classes with Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, appearing in works by Anna Sokolow and Sophie Maslow, and taking a lead role in Jack Cole’s musical *Jamaica*. Seeing that ‘the New York City concert dance scene was basically closed to black dancers,’ he gathered together dancers in an informal company, creating *Blues Suite* (1958) and *Revelations* (1960), complementary works that recast autobiography as ‘blood memories,’ the collective memory of African-American culture.[[1]](#endnote-1) While *Blues Suite* recalled Saturday-night jook joints from his Texas childhood, *Revelations* recalled Sunday-morning church services. His aim, Ailey later wrote, ‘was to show the coming and the growth and reach of black culture.’[[2]](#endnote-2)

**Major Contributions to the Field and Modernism**

Over the next thirty years, Ailey created nearly eighty dance works, including contributions to Broadway and opera stages. Overall, his choreographic style was eclectic: influenced greatly by Horton, his style also embodies the later influences of Graham, Humphrey, Sokolow, Maslow, Dunham, and Jack Cole. Works that reveal what Ailey called ‘blood memories’ include—in addition to *Blues Suite* and *Revelations—Roots of the Blues* (1961), *Masekela Langage* (1969), a protest against South African apartheid, and the solo *Cry* (1971) ‘dedicated to all Black women everywhere, especially our mothers,’ as the program noted. Biographical works dedicated to the memory of the departed include *Flowers* (1971) based on the life and death of Janis Joplin, *Memoria* (1979)dedicated to fellow Horton dancer Joyce Trisler, *Precipice* (1983) inspired by Jim Morrison and Jimi Hendrix, and *For Bird—With Love* (1984)based on the life of Charlie Parker. More classically oriented and abstract works include *Streams* (1970)*, The River* (1970), *Archipelago* (1971)*,* *The Lark Ascending* (1972), and *Hidden Rites* (1973).

Like Ailey’s choreographic style, his movement style resulted from an amalgamation of influences, combining techniques he learned throughout his dance training—Horton, ballet, Graham, Dunham. Music was the impetus for movement, in all his works but especially in works created in collaboration with his peers Duke Ellington and Max Roach. In rehearsal, Ailey often used imagery. As he once said, ‘dance is a moving painting of life.’[[3]](#endnote-3) Feeling and intention were paramount in the performance of his work. ‘Dramatic values are as important as the dance values,’ he asserted.[[4]](#endnote-4) ‘What I like,’ he elaborated, ‘is the line and technical range that classical ballet gives to the body. But I still want to project to the audience the expressiveness that only modern dance offers, especially for the inner kinds of things.’[[5]](#endnote-5)

At a time when many choreographers created companies to showcase only their own works, Ailey created a repertory company that presented the works of many other choreographers in addition to his own. Especially significant were the works by other black choreographers—Talley Beatty, Katherine Dunham, Donald McKayle, and Ulysses Dove. But Ailey also programmed the works of white peers whose theatrical aesthetic complemented his own—Horton’s *Liberian Suite* (1952, entered Ailey repertory 1975), Trisler’s *The Journey* (1958, entered repertory 1964), Sokolow’s *Rooms* (1954, entered repertory 1964), Lucas Hoving’s *Icarus* (1964, entered repertory 1969), Limon’s *Missa Brevis* (1958, entered repertory 1973), and Lar Lubovitch’s *Les Noces* (1976, entered repertory 1979).[[6]](#endnote-6) Rooted in the practice of African-American modern dance, the Ailey company encompasses a range of American choreography.

From its earliest days, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has served as a cultural ambassador for the United States. With State Department support, the Ailey company toured Southeast Asia and Australia in 1962. In 1967 the company toured Africa, following the company’s appearance the year before at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. In 1970 the company was the first U.S. company to tour the Soviet Union.[[7]](#endnote-7) Since then, regular international tours have alternated with steady national touring. The national and international reach of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre cannot be underestimated.

**Legacy**

Since Ailey’s death from AIDS in 1989, his company has continued and extended his legacy. Former star dancer Judith Jamison became artistic director in 1989, and for the next two decades, she continued the repertory practices that Ailey had established, creating her own works for the company, most notably *Hymn* (1993), a tribute to Ailey with text by Anna Deavere Smith. At the same time she commissioned new works from an upcoming generation of black choreographers—Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Donald Byrd, Bill T. Jones, Ronald K. Brown, Alonzo King, Camille Brown, Robert Battle—while also adding classic works by white choreographers—Jerome Robbins, Twyla Tharp, Ohad Naharin. In 2011 Robert Battle took over as artistic director and promised to expand the repertory even further.

Ailey’s model for a repertory company inspired the founding of a number of other companies in the U.S. dedicated to the repertory of black modern dance. In 1970 Joan Myers Brown founded Philadanco, following Ailey’s example of featuring her own choreography alongside other black choreographers and a few white choreographers; a number of dancers who started in the company have gone on to join Ailey.[[8]](#endnote-8) The Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, founded by Jeraldyne Blunden in 1968, and the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Company in Denver, founded by Robinson in1970, have also extended the example of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

The Ailey School, founded with Graham dancer Pearl Lang in 1970, has developed into a leading center for dance training in New York City. The school offers training in the range of techniques that impacted Ailey—Horton, Dunham, Graham, ballet, jazz, West African. In 1998 the school launched a BFA program in collaboration with Fordham University, and in 2004 the school moved into a new building that provides not only space for preprofessional training but also for a wide array of community classes. As Ailey stated the year before his death: ‘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.’[[9]](#endnote-9)

**Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell**

**List of Works**

*Afternoon Blues* (1953)

*Morning Mourning* (1954)

*According to St. Francis* (1954)

*Creation of the World* (1954)

[*Blues Suite*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/140/) (1958)

[*Cinco Latinos*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/256/) (1958)

[*Ode and Homage*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/369/) (1958)

*Mistress and Manservant* (1959)

[*Ariette Oubliee*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/214/)(1959)

*Jamaica* (1960)

[*Knoxville Summer of 1915*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/345/) (1960)

[*Sonera*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/1176/)(1960)

*T*[*hree for Now-Modern Jazz Suite*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/434/) (1960)

*African Holiday* (1960)

[*Revelations*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/161/)(1960)

[*Gillespiana*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/325/)(1961)

[*Hermit Songs*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/330/) (1961)

[*Roots of the Blues*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/392/) (1961)

[*Labyrinth*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/346/) (1962)

[*Creation of the World* (New Version)](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/275/) (1962)

[*Feast of Ashes*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/309/) (1962)

[*Reflections in D*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/159/)(1962)

[*Rivers, Streams, Doors*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/389/) (1963)

[*The Blues Ain't*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/421/)(1963)

[*First Negro Centennial*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/313/) (1963)

*Jerico-Jim Crow* (1964)

[*The Twelve Gates*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/430/) (1964)

[*Been Here and Gone*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/217/) (1964)

*Ariadne* (1965)

*El Armor Brujo* (1966)

*Macumba* (1966)

*Anthony and Cleopatra* (1966)

[*Riedaiglia*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/387/) (1967)

[*Quintet*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/382/) (1968)

*La Strada* (1969)

[*Masekela Langage*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/155/) (1969)

*Diversion No. 1* (1969)

[*Gymnopedies*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/326/) (1970)

[*Streams*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/412/)(1970)

[*The River*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/169/) (1970)

[*Choral Dances*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/252/) (1971)

[*Cry*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/282/) (1971)

[*Flowers*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/150/)(1971)

[*Mary Lou's Mass*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/356/) (1971)

*Mass*- collaboration with Leonard Bernstein for the opening of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington DC (1971)

[*Mingus*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/359/) (1971)

[*Myth*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/363/) (1971)

[*Archipelago*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/213/) (1971)

*Lord Byron* (1972)

[*Love Songs*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/354/) (1972)

*Sea Change* (1972)

[*Shaken Angels*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/400/) (1972)

[*The Lark Ascending*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/423/) (1972)

*Carmen* (1972)

*Four Saints in Three Acts* (1973)

[*Hidden Rites*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/331/) (1973)

[*Sacred Concert*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/393/)(1974)

[*Sonnet for Caesar*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/406/) (1974)

[*Such Sweet Thunder*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/413/)(1974)

*Ailey Celebrates Ellington* (1974)

[*Night Creature*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/157/) (1975)

[*The Mooche*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/425/)(1975)

[*Three Black Kings*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/433/)(1976)

[*Pas de Duke*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/158/)(1976)

[*Passage*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/372/)(1978)

*Shigaon! Children of the Diaspora* (1978)

*Solo for Mingus* (1979)

[*Memoria*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/156/)(1979)

[*Phases*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/374/)(1980)

[*Spell*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/410/)(1981)

[*Landscape*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/348/) (1981)

[*Satyriade*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/395/) (1982)

[*Precipice*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/381/) *(Au Bord du Precipice)* (1983)

[*Isba*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/340/) (1983)

*Can’t Slow Down* (1983)

*Escapades* (1983)

[*For 'Bird' - With Love*](http://www.alvinailey.org/node/317/)(1984)

*Caverna Magica* (1986)

*Survivors* (1986)

*Witness* (1986)

*La Dea della Acqua* (1988)

*Opus McShann* (1988)

**Artist’s Writings**

A. Ailey with A.P. Bailey (1995) *Revelations: The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey*, New York: Birch Lane Press.

**References and further reading**

DeFrantz, T. F. (2004) *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Dunning, J. (1996) *Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance*, Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Jamison, J. with H. Kaplan (1993) *Dancing Spirit: An Autobiography*, New York: Anchor.

Warren, L. (1977) *Lester Horton, Modern Dance Pioneer*, New York: Marcel Dekker.

**Film Documentation**

Bertelsen, P. (2007) *Beyond the Steps: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater*, New York: Docurama Films.

Grimm, T. (1986) *An Evening with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater*, Chicago: Home Vision.

Grimm, T. (1990) *A Tribute to Alvin Ailey*, Chicago: Home Vision.

**Suggested Paratexts**

Photograph of a young Alvin Ailey, by John Lindquist © Harvard Theatre Collection

<http://www.danceheritage.org/ailey.html>

*Revelations,* photographer: Paul Kolnik, Ailey Collection, Library of Congress

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/alvin-ailey-american-dance-theater/exhibition-items.html#obj11>

*For Bird-With Love,* Ailey Collection, Library of Congress

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/alvin-ailey-american-dance-theater/exhibition-items.html#obj21>

1. Quoted in S. Manning (2004) *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 179, 210. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. A. Ailey with A.P. Bailey (1995) *Revelations: The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey*, New York: Birch Lane Press, 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress; Box 150. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress; Box 149. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Quoted in T.F. DeFrantz (2004) *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press, 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See T. F. DeFrantz (2005) ‘Composite Bodies of Dance: The Repertory of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater,’ *Theatre Journal* 57 (4): 659-78. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See C. Croft (2015) *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange,* New York: Oxford University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See B. Dixon Gottschild (2012) *Joan Myers Brown & the Audacious Hope of the Black Ballerina: A Biohistory of American Performance*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Quoted in A. Kisslegoff (1988), ‘Dancing the Dream,’ *New York Times* (4 December), A1. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)