Transcending: A Teachers’ Guide to Alvin Ailey

Alvin Ailey and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

An Interdisciplinary Partnership Project in Arts Education
by *White Bird*, Portland Public Schools,
and Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, Director, Arts in Education,
Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

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Dear Students,

Welcome to the exciting world of Alvin Ailey! Each year, White Bird and Portland Public Schools will be collaborating to bring you the rare opportunity to study and then see an elite dance company perform live. It is our hope that exploring Alvin Ailey and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater from an integrated perspective will help you make interesting connections to your own lives.

Dance, like all the arts, informs us about the world and ourselves. The Ailey project is designed to lead you on an investigation that will begin with a dancer, but will encourage you to explore your own creative soul. In this unit, you will, perhaps, see students dancing their own poems, then create your own poems. Maybe you will find connections between hip-hop and Ailey. You might see how teenagers during the 50’s and 60’s laid their lives on the line for civil rights and relate this to your own struggles now. Or maybe you will explore creatively what your own family has given to you through the generations. These types of themes were what drove Alvin Ailey, and we believe they will drive you as well. By exploring themes such as “blood memories”, segregation, justice and equal rights, contemporary culture, and performing as a medium of self and collective expression, we hope that you will make new discoveries.

The Ailey project is about exploring different ways to learn and understand. You will read, discuss, watch videos, write, draw, move, and create both individually and with classmates. Like Lewis and Clark, Alvin Ailey was a pioneer. The mountains of prejudice he encountered were rugged and high, and yet his determination afforded him a breathtaking view and remarkable artistic accomplishments. Climb, move as Ailey did, and enjoy your learning.

See you at the theater!

Walter Jaffe  
White Bird

Paul King  
White Bird

Fred Locke  
Portland Public Schools

Peter Thacker  
Portland Public Schools
Dear Educator:

A performance by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is a combination of technique, discipline, passion and commitment to show you a reflection of yourself. We hope that your perspective changes while you’re in the theater. We hope that you experience a journey like no other. Wait till you see us – we’re like no other dance company in the world! For those of you taking your students to the theater for the first time, welcome. Our study guide is designed to help make those few hours a more enriching, enjoyable experience, and one that will remain with you long after the performance ends. Inside, we explain our goals, you’ll meet our dancers, and we’ll explore opportunities for young people in the dance – onstage as well as off.

Alvin Ailey, our founder and mentor said dance should entertain as well as educate. That’s just what we’ve been doing for almost forty years. We celebrate the human experience through movement. We are performers, and we believe that the performing arts and education go hand-in-hand. Dance has the power to change lives, and a performance by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has the power to ignite a spark in a young person’s life.

After sharing this guide with your students they’ll be ready to fully appreciate the magic of Ailey.

As a member of our audience, you’ll be a part of the Ailey family. We look forward to seeing you often.

Sincerely,

{SCAN IN SIGNATURE FROM JUDITH JAMISON}
signed
Judith Jamison
Artistic Director
Forward

Last spring, when Paul King and Walter Jaffe of *White Bird* approached me with the opportunity to develop an Alvin Ailey Curriculum for the Portland Public Schools, I was very excited. Dance can inform all students, and the chance to create an interdisciplinary unit that would allow students to explore the rare talents and gifts of Alvin Ailey and his company seemed both an honor and privilege. Twenty years ago Ailey’s company and Judith Jamison wowed me in a live performance in Philadelphia. My respect for these superbly talented dancers whose poise, energy, courage, and important work has burgeoned through this, my recent, research. Ailey’s life and work address fundamental issues that resonate deeply and deserve our attention. To understand the cultural roots of Mr. Ailey is to explore not only a formative time in the history of the United States, but is to examine cultural, social, and political cornerstones from a personal and artistic perspective.

Howard Gardner insists that learning becomes exciting when we explore connections between our creative and analytic selves, and when we explore a subject in depth, our learning and fun become synonymous. The Ailey Project is designed to allow teachers and students to explore the richness of Ailey’s life from a variety of entry points and draw their own conclusions. It is our hope and intention that the Ailey Project will challenge students and teachers alike to explore, discover, and enjoy the arts.

Acknowledgements:

The Ailey Project was a truly collaborative effort. We are particularly grateful to Paul King and Walter Jaffe of *White Bird*, and Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, Director, Arts in Education, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, for creating this unique educational opportunity for Portland Public School students. They dared to dream, and diligently pursued the myriad of details needed to support this high profile visit. The dedication of the Ailey Core team, Gloria Canson, Santha Cassell, David Colton, Kris Demien, Pam Hall, Portia Hall, Pam Hooten, and Dawn Jackson who, despite late meetings and a short timetable, ensured that *White Bird*’s vision of a successful educational outreach project were fully realized, deserve special attention. Equally important, we wish to thank Ellen Bergstone Beer and Cynthia Guyer of The Portland Public Schools Foundation, whose commitment and assistance in securing funding for this project are appreciated beyond words. Thanks also to Cody Curtis, parent-volunteer, whose editing, word processing, and organizational skills are matched only by Pam Jones, with her patience and elegant layout. Both calmly stretched our existing timetable, enabling us to meet our deadlines.

Finally, much of the quality of this document lies in the extremely capable hands of my gifted friend and fellow Democrat Peter Thacker. His literary expertise has allowed us to move quickly as we worked to distill the essence of Ailey’s life.

Introduction To Alvin Ailey

Alvin Ailey and The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater are hallmarks of the 20th century. From roots of poverty and segregation, Alvin Ailey rose to found a company that the world still embraces because as it entertains, it celebrates the beauty and richness of the human spirit. Alvin Ailey was a proud black man, but he remained committed to creating an interracial company that through dance would communicate with the widest possible audience. As Anna Kisselgoff writes, “Ailey liked making dance “accessible to all people” (Arts and Leisure, NYT).

Alvin Ailey joins Martha Graham, Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn as pioneers of American modern dance. By celebrating his own roots and the black experience, Ailey legitimized that movement transcends skin color, and is not confined to the specifics of a particular style of dance. Ailey was adamant that his dancers train in all styles, and their high level of technique opened many eyes that black and dancers of all ethnicities were more than capable of performing as brilliant artists. Ailey’s ballets, and the works he commissioned for his company from other aspiring choreographers, gave his dancers the opportunity to experience and share their tremendous versatility. Broadening the dance landscape, Ailey addressed racism, and the social and political realities that faced him and his colleagues.

To understand that The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is one of the elite international companies of the world, it is vital to revisit the humble roots of Alvin Ailey, and to appreciate the equally inspiring talents of the present artistic director, Judith Jamison. Alvin was Judith’s spiritual walker, and in giving her “wings to fly,” Miss Jamison has ensured that the company and school Alvin and others sacrificed so much to create and nurture, is secure, vibrant, and remains on the cutting edge of dance as it greets the next millennium.
I. Blood Memories: a Chronological Biography of Alvin Ailey

“...Inspiration. Where does it come from? ...Anything that quickens you to the instant... I love the idea of life pulsing through people—blood and movement.”

Martha Graham

➢ Early years in Texas

Alvin Ailey was born in Rogers, Texas on January 5, 1931. Alvin was the fourteenth member of the household, living initially with both his parents, a grandfather, an aunt and uncle, and eight cousins. Rogers, like other small towns throughout the South, was segregated. Despite relatively peaceful coexistence between blacks and whites, daily life constantly reminded blacks that racist norms created a harsh, unequal reality. As Jennifer Dunning describes: “In the 1930’s, when Alvin was a child, public facilities were segregated, and “colored” facilities were almost always humiliatingly inferior to what whites could expect” (1996, 2). Alvin’s childhood was rich with experiences and opportunities, but only because his persistent and resourceful mother Lula Elizabeth Ailey was determined to provide for them a better life.

Alvin’s early life was almost nomadic and at times intensely lonely. When Alvin was three months old, Lula and Alvin Sr. moved into their own wooden cabin on a farm outside Rogers. Alvin’s mother did domestic work for white families, and planted a garden for their own vegetables. Three months later, Alvin Sr. left his family. His lack of education made it difficult to provide the future that Lula was determined to have for herself and Alvin, but she remained true to her goal of seeking a better life. Lula was seventeen, Alvin was six months, and despite the fact that Alvin Sr. briefly reentered their lives four years later, Alvin would never know or have a relationship with his father.

By the time Alvin attended elementary school in Navasota, Texas, he and his mother had moved six times. For the most part, each move enabled Lula to gain better employment, but still her early working life revolved mostly around the hard labor of household chores and picking cotton. Sometimes Alvin would pick with his mother, but Lula recalled that “mostly, ...he slept on top of the sacks” (1996, 7). Lula’s long hours of work meant that she occasionally drank too much, and responded abusively to Alvin. Not wanting his mother to leave, Alvin would often cry, provoking Lula to sometimes yell or hit him. Another incident regarding the identity of his father, cruelly left Alvin with “lifelong doubt.” Although Lula indicated later that she was just teasing, she told Alvin that, “his father was a dashing young man named Eddie Warfield, whom Alvin had observed from afar in a barroom brawl” (1996, 11). Unfortunately, this left a lasting impression.
Other hardships added to the complexity of Alvin’s loving but bittersweet relationship with his mother. After moving back to Rogers, while they were living on their own in a cabin, Lula was raped by a group of white men. Alvin was five and tried to comfort and help, but the experience was traumatic for both. Only because Alvin overheard an adult conversation did he come to hear of the attack, and her rape was never something Lula discussed with Alvin. Life was hard for both of them, and like many blacks in the South, they did not escape the violence that racism perpetuated. “The number of lynchings had dropped steadily during the second half of the decade, with the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama reporting a total of three in 1939, in Florida and Mississippi. But there was muted talk among the grown-ups of murders, the Ku Klux Klan and imprisonment, all of which were feared realities in the lives of most black males” (1996, 3).

Sundays in Rogers were special, and the active congregational life at the Mount Olive Baptist church proved later to be an important source of choreographic inspiration for Ailey. Participating in the long services, Alvin soaked up the richness of the hymns, songs, and the surrounding black culture. At age five Alvin was baptized in the lake behind the church. “Wade in the Water,” the second section “of his signature ballet Revelations, beautifully depicts this important event. Furthermore, Pilgrim of Sorrow, which opens the ballet, is set to the hauntingly beautiful gospel hymn “I’ve been bucked, I’ve been scorned.” Sung by the pastor’s wife and the president of the mission society, Miss Hattie Taplin on the day Alvin was baptized, Ailey’s choreography enhances the simplistic text and harmonies by embracing you with a melancholic purity that seemingly joins joy and sorrow. Creating beauty and celebrating the enduring struggle of the black experience was a recurring theme in Ailey’s work. Ailey had a penchant for speaking directly from and to the heart, and it is not difficult to grasp the importance of these early blood memories.

The Mount Olive Baptist church still stands today. Its’ utilitarian white frame reminds us that the power of the faith and the faithful rests with the community within and their collective spirit. Despite the brimming activity and welcoming solace of this church in Rogers, life improved dramatically for both Alvin and his mother when they moved to the larger and more cosmopolitan Texas town of Navasota.

Shortly after settling in Navasota, Lula suffered from an emergency appendectomy. Despite the seriousness of her illness, it resulted in her accepting a lucrative hospital position that enabled her to gradually pay off her debt. It was unusual for a black woman to be offered skilled work, but Lula took the offer and further stability followed. Lula met and dated the most successful and highly respected black businessman in Navasota, Texas, Alexander Amos. Eventually Lula and Alvin moved in with Mr. Amos, accepting the security and Alvin thrived. In fourth grade, he took advantage of a new music program and chose to play the tuba at George Washington Carver School. The fact that the school was in the white section of town did not seem an issue and Alvin distinguished himself. “Alvin was not a person to start a discussion,” Darcell Jackson, a classmate, recalled. “But he liked to lead. He had ideas. And he wanted to be successful. Amos was successful” (1996, 16).

Alvin was happy in Navasota, and it offered Alvin culture and other new experiences. Amos taught Alvin to ride a horse, gave him responsibilities around their farm, and taught him to
plant fruit trees. Mr. Alexander’s piano and old Victrola afforded Alvin the chance to surround himself with music which he describes “always enthralled him” (1997, 21). Building on this and what Alvin was exposed to in church, blues singers and minstrel shows frequented this larger town and augmented his musical experiences. Alvin and his friends also spent Saturdays watching cowboy films at the local segregated movie house. Alvin liked to draw, and sketched insects and small animals on a regular basis. To his mother’s consternation, Alvin had high standards and often threw many of his drawings away (1996, 17).

Alvin became good friends with a Mexican boy whose family was very hospitable. Teaching Alvin Spanish, and introducing him to delicious food were highlights, but unfortunately, the family eventually moved. Chancey, a strong older boy with a questionable reputation helped fill the void. Saving Alvin from drowning when he fell into a favorite haunt—the forbidden water tower, also prompted sexual exploration of a different kind. As Dunning relates:

He jumped on the younger boy’s body and began to pump it, trying to push the swallowed water out. Gradually, Alvin’s fear and panic subsided, to be replaced by new and frightening feelings of physical pleasure”… “wrestling sessions soon began to occur in which Chancey would climb onto Alvin’s body and rub against it. The experience considerably quashed some tentative sexual exploration with a girl in his school. Many years later, Alvin described the sessions to a lover not just as an instance of youthful sexual exploration but as an experience of haunting purity and loss” (1996, 19).

Promiscuous behavior was not new to Alvin. As he matured, Navasota’s Dew Drop Inn on a Saturday night was a place that captured the imaginations of Alvin and his friends. Watching the adults sing and dance until early in the morning proved to be not only youthful entertainment, but provided the baseline for *Blues Suite*, one of Ailey’s first ballets. Despite all this activity, Alvin in some ways remained on the outside.

“My whole early life in Texas was a kind of rambling, rural life,” Alvin once said. “We lived around with a lot of people. We were always on the go. I began to feel as if there were a lot of trains in my life. I also remember that I felt very alienated—never really having a father. I always felt like an outsider around kids who did. I was always very lonely—I knew that I was loved, but I never felt understood” (1996, 12).
Los Angeles

Alexander Amos and Navasota provided a lot for Lula and Alvin, but not enough to keep them. In 1941, with $18 dollars, Lula followed relatives to Los Angeles, hopeful that the busy urban environment would allow her to continue to improve their chances for a better life. After completing the school year in Navasota, Alvin, like many black children, crossed the country by himself to join his mother. Again, Lula’s instincts were right; she found better employment and Los Angeles offered her twelve year old son a wealth of new formative experiences.

Lula first found domestic work in the upscale suburb of Westlake. However, when Alvin was very unhappy attending the all white public school, they moved to a mixed neighborhood (with black, Latin, and Asian families) on Valencia Avenue. An honor roll student with three years of perfect attendance, Alvin continued to involve himself in junior high school life. He wrote for the school newspaper and liked creative writing and poetry. Although he avoided competitive sports and did not like tap dancing, Ailey learned gymnastics, which served to develop his flexibility, coordination, strength, and discipline.

Junior High School field trips took Alvin to see the Mikado and Lena Horne, but the intriguing black cultural and social scene of Central Avenue continued to expose Alvin to some of the brightest entertainers of the day. At the Lincoln Theater Alvin saw Pearl Bailey, Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington, and comedian Pigmeat Markham. For someone who did not want to study tap dancing, films of Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, the Nicholas Brothers, and Bill Robinson, did prompt Ailey to imitate and practice their impressive moves mostly for his mother (1996, 28). Since arriving in Los Angeles, Lula continued to work very long hours and thus their mutual time during the week remained scant. Saturday family night at the Club Alabam was different, as it allowed Alvin and his mother to enjoy a regular evening out.

When Alvin was fourteen, Lula met Fred Cooper and they eventually married. Lula’s responsibility of being a single mother was taking it’s toll, and although Alvin was not at all ready to share his mother, Fred cared for him and Lula was ready for a permanent relationship. She had steady and well paying work at Lockheed Aircraft Corporation, and the brighter future that she had sought for herself and her son became a reality.

At the predominantly black neighborhood Thomas Jefferson public High School, Alvin continued to be a strong and involved student. Alvin loved the diversity of the school, and the interest and caring of the teachers.

“Jefferson has always been mainly black,” said Don Martin, a high school friend who became one of Alvin’s earliest dance colleagues. “There were a lot of Mexicans, Chinese, Japanese then. Jeff was a school nobody wanted to go to. They thought was a bad school. Blacks wanted to as closely associated to white schools as possible.” Like many, Martin had lied about his home address in order to get into a school in a better neighborhood. He was caught and transferred to Jefferson for his senior year. “I thought, ‘Oh God, this is the end of my world.’ But it was the best thing that ever
happened. When I got to Jefferson, I found out that it was totally different. The teachers were better. They were more interested in you. It was a better school” (1996,31).

His gift for languages persisted as he learned Chinese from a neighborhood grocer, and occasionally substituted for the Spanish teacher when needed. As a senior in 1948, he was asked to participate in a graduation debate. Arguing “Building the Peace,” Alvin impressed his classmates and made his parents proud.
II. Early Influences on Ailey’s Professional Career

- Katherine Dunham

Two key school field trips sparked Alvin’s interest in dance. At the LA Philharmonic Auditorium in downtown Los Angeles, Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo performed Scheherazade. Although Alvin was awed by the technique and poise of Alexandra Danilova, and American Indian ballerina Maria Tallchief, it was seeing Katherine Dunham’s Tropical Revue at the Biltmore Theater that proved truly mesmerizing. Seeing Dunham and her company was important to Ailey on several levels. Not only was Katherine Dunham an educated black star (anthropologist, choreographer, performer, director), her entire company consisted of talented, strong, and beautiful black dancers. Dunham’s distinctive choreography, combining her ethnic Caribbean roots with social dancing resonated strongly with Ailey. “He got more glimpses of backstage life, but it was what happened onstage that gripped his imagination. For there was theater that was both new and yet familiar, was hot and irresistible as the preachers and singers and moaners of Texas church Sundays. The women who danced were beautiful. The men were big and virile and unlike any other male dancers he had ever seen. And they were black. They were all black” (1996, 34).

- Carmen de Lavallade, fellow student at Jefferson High

Katherine Dunham planted a seed that Carmen de Lavallade, a fellow student at Jefferson High, would help Alvin sow. Alvin had seen Carmen dance with a partner in school assemblies, and introduced him to the teacher, choreographer, and artistic director, Lester Horton. Carmen was to become a rare friend and professional colleague of Alvin’s. They debuted in the Broadway show House of Flowers in 1955, she danced for many years in his company, and she eloquently “sent him home” at his funeral in 1989. Carmen’s beauty and grace were of a timeless purity. This helped them maintain a relatively close relationship even when she left the company to marry Geoffrey Holder. De Lavallade had other significant connections. She was raised by her Aunt Adele, who atypically owned a bookstore devoted to black writers. Despite her obvious talent, because of her race Carmen’s cousin Janet Collins, a lead ballerina for the Metropolitan Opera, never gained employment in the more prestigious New York City Ballet or American Ballet Theater. All these aspects of Alvin’s relationship with de Lavallade were important to his professional development but none more so than being introduced to Lester Horton.

- Lester Horton

Lester Horton and his dance company seemed a perfect fit for Alvin during his formative years of training. A gifted teacher, Horton devoted his life to developing members of his company. Horton’s racially integrated American company was the first of its kind, and his theatrical style demanded that all his dancers develop extensive characterizations as part of
their roles. Horton, a white man, maintained a family atmosphere whereby everyone contributed to the myriad of details necessary to mount productions.

“...company members and apprentices were there to study not just Horton dance but music, the history of the arts, choreography and the design and construction of sets and costumes. Classes in lighting, makeup, speech and even current events were also given. It was, as Alvin later said, as unparalleled education” (1996, 46).

The home like atmosphere that Lester Horton provided for his dancers was especially important to Alvin. When his mother married Fred Cooper, part of Alvin felt betrayed. Convinced that he himself would soon be able to provide for her, Alvin remained aloof and detached from family life. In 1953, when his step-brother Calvin was born, Alvin’s jealousy intensified. Alvin struggled with basic civility towards Calvin, and despite his love for Lula, experienced anger and a deep lack of trust. “Years after, there were times when he refused to go the telephone when his mother called, telling friends to say he was out, and through much of his life he veered between a cutting hatred of her and intense love and need. He swallowed his feelings, keeping them to himself for decades” (1996, 29,30).

Studying dance with Horton was demanding, and the fact that Alvin had little time for his family or anything else seemed to almost be advantageous. Coincidentally, Horton’s racially integrated company finally got their New York debut in 1953, and dramatic changes were in store for Alvin as he headed east. Soon after his company’s debut, Horton suffered from a heart attack and died. Despite his lack of experience, Alvin agreed to take over as artistic director, and one year later honored Horton’s commitment to appear at the prestigious Jacob’s Pillow Summer Dance Festival in Lee, Massachusetts. Although the company was not particularly well received, Alvin was gaining needed professional exposure and experience.
III. Alvin Ailey Dance Theater

➢ New York debut, and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

His Broadway debut with Carmen de Lavallade in *The House of Flowers* began a series of musical engagements for Alvin, the most important of which was *Jamaica*. Starring Lena Horne and directed by Jack Cole, *Jamaica* was critical to Ailey and other dancers he was working with because it provided many of them with regular employment. Not having to
wait tables or work other second jobs gave Alvin time to choreograph and rehearse his
dancers. Roughly a year after joining Jamaica, in 1958, Ailey realized his dream of
presenting his own concert at the 92nd Street Y Theater. Despite a piece he dedicated to his
mentor Lester Horton, it was Blues Suite that captured the audiences’ attention. A blend of
Dew Drop Ins and the social scene that he had been entranced by both in Texas and on the
West Coast, Alvin captured without apology the joy and pain of black culture.

This first concert of the *Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater* was followed closely by a
second performance at the Y and a more successful return to Jacob’s Pillow in 1959.
However, it was not until Alvin enamored audiences with *Revelations* in January 1960 that
the idea of truly starting a permanent company took hold. An east coast station wagon toured
materialized, and Ailey’s mission to provide a forum for predominantly black dancers and
choreographers began in earnest. As the resident dance company at the YWCA Clark Center
for the performing Arts, Alvin and his dancers finally had a place to study, rehearse, store
costumes and teach. Although the Clark Center was the first of what would prove to be a
string of residences, Alvin had undeniably made an impressive start toward legitimizing the
permanency of a predominantly black company. What Alvin came to realize was that despite
his initial success it would be years and miles of international acclaim before the closed
community of New York’s “high art” would accept and recognize the worth of the company
he was in the process of building.

- **First International Tour**

At President Kennedy’s invitation, the opportunity to tour South East Asia and Australia for
thirteen weeks provided a forum to share the company’s message of inclusion—a message
that proved contagious and too powerful to be ignored. President Kennedy saw political and
social value in sending a predominantly black dance company overseas as “American
Ambassadors.” Ailey wanted his company to reach across the barriers of language, race, and
cultural division to entertain. His vision was “to communicate with the widest possible
audience, and make dance accessible to all people.” As Ailey commented to Anna
Kisselgoff of the New York Times: “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-
esteeem, especially in the arts and in dance. That’s what it’s all about to me.” (1996, 388)

- **Addressing Racism**

Working to achieve this reality was a long, constant, and arduous process. The beginnings of
the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater were humble, but by devoting much of the 1960s to
touring Brazil, Europe, and the United States, the company gained recognition and stature.
Alvin was committed to particularly creating opportunities for black artists. He had grown
up with segregation and deplored its’ injustice. He recognized that despite the 1954 Supreme
Court Brown versus Board of Education ruling outlawing segregated schools, the successful
bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, and other civil rights actions, confronting racism
required risk and presented a protracted fight. Ailey chose to participate, and his method set
him apart.
With ballets such as *Blues Suite* and *Revelations* he addressed racism by celebrating the Black American experience. Ailey was not afraid of touring the South, and wanted his choreography to have a wide appeal. In an interview with Ellen Cohn he explained:

“I feel an obligation to use black dancers because there must be more opportunities for them but not because I’m a black choreographer talking to black people…Revelations comes from Negro spirituals and gospels. Its roots are in American Negro culture, which is part of the whole country’s heritage. The dance speaks to everyone—to Yugoslavs, to Poles, to the Chinese. Otherwise it wouldn’t work…” (1996, 243)

➤ Creating Opportunities for Dancers

Ailey was a dynamic and expressive performer, and he demanded that his dancers were strong and versatile. He pushed his dancers to train hard, “hone their bodies as instruments,” and to share their spirits. Despite the fact that many blacks expected him to hire only African Americans, Ailey remained inclusive and sought his company’s eclectic look. Unlike other modern choreographers who focused on developing and performing a particular style, by inviting guest artists to set pieces on his company, Ailey not only provided work for up and coming artists, but his dancers enjoyed a varied repertoire. As an artistic director, he challenged his dancers and appreciated their individuality. As Clive Barnes wrote:

Ailey is an equal opportunity employer in a field and at a time when equal opportunity is not that fashionable…It would be easier—more acceptable—for Ailey to form an all-Black company…But Ailey goes the hard way of his conscience. It is a very old-fashioned kind of militancy and, I suspect, it brings in less cash, yet there is the individuality of genius here. Also, when Ailey, I think our black leader in American dance, demands such ethnic variety, and so successfully achieves this racial mix, can our ‘white’ companies afford to stand aside?” and Alvin, he continued, not only presented a racially integrated company but “also employs indiscriminately black and white choreographers” (1996, 253)

The ideal body for classical dancing is tall and slender, with a small head on a long neck, short torso, and long limbs to accentuate the body’s natural line. Although modern dance companies did not heed this to the extent that ballet companies did, seeking sameness or uniformity was an established practice thought to enhance or present the choreography with more clarity. Ailey had different ideas, and he encouraged his dancers to share their individuality.

“Ailey had an eye for the performer who didn’t fit the mold, and so the Ailey troupe was a less heterogeneous group than many, with allowances made of dynamic performers cursed with less than perfect bodies that would have cost them jobs in many other companies. Like the sleek beauties who otherwise filled the profession, however, theses performers had an at least superficial sense of their own worth.”
Continuing Achievement and Growth

Alvin understood the depth and pervasiveness of racism, and remained committed to the fight. Evidence of his achievement came when he represented the United States in Dakar, Senegal, West Africa, at the *First World Festival of Negro Arts* in 1967. This was arranged in conjunction with a West Africa tour that may have influenced Ailey’s ability to secure respective grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Rockefeller Foundation the following year.

As the company grew, its’ need for adequate space became critical. Accepting the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s offer to be their resident company in 1969 was a major step forward. Desiring to give neighborhood students the chance to study dance, Ailey started a company school (the Center for Arts Education). The best companies have their own schools, and Ailey made a start. Good instruction improves technique, future dancers can be nurtured, and company members got the opportunity to teach and choreograph. Ailey rarely felt secure, or that the company ever achieved the financial stability that the more traditional national and international ballet companies enjoyed, but Ailey was emerging as an undeniable force in modern dance.

Alvin was in demand, and pushed himself relentlessly. In the early years, while dancing, rehearsing, and setting works on his own company, Ailey choreographed pieces such as *The River*, and *Reflections in D*, for American Ballet Theater and the Joffrey Ballet respectively. This furthered his reputation, and brought in needed money that Ailey reinvested into the company.

Russian tour

In 1970, the company was again asked to tour abroad as “American Ambassadors.” Beginning in Copenhagen (Erik Bruhn territory), and then Leningrad (St. Petersburg—home of the famous Kirov Ballet), performances in London and Paris were also arranged on route. Twenty curtain calls, and twenty minutes of thunderous applause greeted the dancers on opening night in Moscow. “The dancers nor anyone backstage could quite believe it had happened. We are a great great success in Moscow” (1996, 265). Ivy Clarke, who became the Ailey company manager in 1968, saw the results of her efforts reach beyond what she and most would have imagined possible. “In Paris, where the company performed at an international dance summit at the Theater des Champs Elysees, Alvin was awarded the festival’s prestigious Etoile D’Or for best modern dance group and choreography” (1996, 265). Having won hearts and respect all over the world, Ailey finally secured a New York Season.

City Center/Cry
For the next twelve years, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performed two, two-week seasons each year at New York’s City Center. Steady engagements across the country and abroad became the norm, and the pressure to produce new work became an even stronger reality. Although this would eventually take its toll, Ailey had a company of superb dancers and continued to create works, or hired other choreographers to showcase their talents.

After traveling and performing on the stages of the world, Alvin was ready to acknowledge and honor the love and sacrifices of his mother Lula. Creating *Cry* for Judith Jamison as a birthday present for his mother was probably as cathartic as it was celebratory. Alvin dedicated the ballet to “all black women everywhere—especially our mothers.” Lula traveled across the country for opening night, and the ballet could not have been more of a success. A ten-minute ovation for Jamison signaled her that the fifteen-minute extraordinarily demanding solo that had been choreographed and learned in eight days, conveyed a relevant truth that resonated deeply—so much so that she was asked to dance *Cry* in 26 consecutive performances (1996, 273).

As he was choreographing for her, Alvin never explained the ballet to Jamison, yet the movement enabled her to capture its essence. As she explains: “In my interpretation, she represented those women before her who came from the hardships of slavery, through the pain of losing loved ones, through overcoming extraordinary depressions and tribulations. Coming out of a world of pain and trouble, she has found her way—and triumphed” (1993, 130). Having subsequently taught the ballet to a number of other women, Jamison writes about *Cry*’s difficulty and timeless quality.

“It was quite an experience. Sixteen minutes later, my lungs were on one side of the stage and my heart on the other. The audience went wild, as they still do, no matter who dances. That’s what I love about *Cry*.
The dance has passed from dancer to dancer, from generation to generation. Cry is about the dance and the dancer, but the dance holds up by itself” (1933, 133).

- The Alvin Ailey American Dance Center

All world-class companies have outstanding schools that support them. The School of American Ballet (New York City Ballet), The Graham School in New York, The Kirov and Bolshoi Schools in St. Petersburg and Moscow respectively, The Royal Ballet School at White Lodge in London, and The Bournenville School in Copenhagen, are among the most reputable. Alvin had two important educational goals: the first was to provide dance opportunities for all community members, and the second was to sustain the company by training select dancers at a high level. In May 1972, the company moved to their present home on 59th Street in Manhattan. More centrally located than Brooklyn, Alvin’s vision of a truly excellent school was building. Pearl Lang agreed to share space with the Ailey Company and, while directing her own company, she also took on the responsibility of running the official company school, Alvin Ailey American Dance Center.

What started in Brooklyn with 125 students was to gradually become a nationally and internationally recognized certified school of the highest caliber. Offering classes to children and adults, students enjoy superior training in modern (Graham, Dunham, and Horton), jazz, tap, and ballet. To nurture young, aspiring dancers, Alvin recognized the necessity of a training ground, and developed a modern base school that would teach students all styles. Ailey was adamant that his dancers were technically strong, stylistically versatile, and expressive. To meet this need, in 1974 Ailey started a second company, The Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble. Providing pre-professional training and performing experience for gifted dancers, some members move into the first company, and others are invited to join companies around the world.

- Ailey Professional Training Program

Ailey understood the importance of training skilled dancers for the company. Now accredited, in addition to offering classes open to the public, the school issues certificates of completion to students who complete their two-year professional training program. The program is by audition only, highly competitive, and advanced students study a variety of subjects in addition to dance technique (history, music, dance composition, theater arts, performing techniques, partnering and repertory) (1994, 47, 48). In keeping with Alvin’s vision of “making dance accessible to all,” the American Dance Center has outreach programs in Kansas City and Baltimore, and a summer residency camp, Ailey Camp, in Kansas City. The outreach programs give public school students the opportunity to study with the outstanding Ailey Faculty, and the company is able to identify students with natural talent outside the New York metropolitan area (1994, 50).

Ailey’s vision and voice remained clear. As a black artist, he focused on black themes and created opportunities for predominantly black dancers, but central to his mission was a more global perspective. He knew that black dancers could embrace and master Swan Lake, that
white dancers could be equally compelling in his ballets, and he continually worked to ensure this reality. As Alvin said to Ellen Cohen in 1973:

“I know it sounds so corny, but I hope I can look back in a few years and think what we’re doing here with our school and our company is celebrating the beauty of the human spirit, of people coming together and accomplishing something. I think people are sanest when they’re working together creatively. That’s the act we live every day in the studio” (1996, 306-307).

➢ Recognition

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was celebrated around the world as a premiere dance company. Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, Alvin’s work was finally being recognized in different circles at home as well as abroad. Previously mentioned was the “Gold Star” award for the best modern dance company in 1970, the Dance Magazine Award in 1975, the Springarn Medal awarded annually by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People honoring achievement by a black American, and the Capezio Award in 1979. In 1984, the National Council for Culture & Art, Inc. presented Ailey with the Monarch Award, and in June of 1987 he received the Scripps American Dance Festival Award. In December of 1988, for “lifetime contributions to ‘American culture through the performing arts’” (1996, 376), President Ronald Reagan bestowed Ailey and four other artists the Kennedy Center Award. For a boy born into poverty and segregation, Ailey’s ability to share his journey was huge: through his life and dance Alvin touched many lives. The Scripps Award citation, awarded to Alvin at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina sums it up:

“To Alvin Ailey, dancer, teacher and choreographer, whose work is generated from the heart and powered by passion; he stands as a model of artistic integrity. An American, informed by the Black experience, Mr. Ailey’s choreography presses through cultural lines and speaks a universal language. His dances, whether sassy, sad, witty or lyrical, have brought joy and a sense of purpose to people throughout the world. Alvin Ailey’s consistent artistic achievements have insured him a place as a giant in the history of American dance” (1996, 376).

➢ Creating Opportunities for other Choreographers

The cloth cut both ways. It was important to Alvin to recognize those individuals who had inspired him. Alvin organized the Ellington Festival in 1976, to share the greatness of this outstanding black composer through a week of dance. The week was comprised of old and new work by Ailey and other choreographers. American Ballet Theater danced Ailey’s The River, Ailey choreographed a duet for Mikhail Baryshnikov and Judith Jamison Pas de Duke, Louis Falco contributed a piece, and Ailey’s Three Black Kings was introduced by Coretta Scott King. As Dunning describes:

“What I really want to do is to bring to audiences the profundity of this man’s contribution—to illustrate not only his music, but his philosophy of life”…”The
public knows him only by his pop pieces. Black composers have a way of disappearing and we want very much for this man to take his rightful place in American and international music history” (1996, 310).

The festival was a success, Ellington was honored, and Ailey had been the catalyst.

Alvin was determined to give young choreographers opportunities to develop and present their work. As the Ailey Company gained recognition, this became easier. By the mid 1960s, Ailey had presented pieces by Horton, John Butler, Glenn Tetley, and company member James Truitte. To continue this trend, Alvin asked former Horton dancer Joyce Trisler to choreograph, and she set *Unanswered Question* and *Journey* (1996, 180). While Alvin was touring in Europe in 1976, Trisler died tragically at the age of 45. To help remember his dear friend, in 1987, Alvin choreographed a tribute to her: *Memoria*. Coming full circle, at Alvin’s funeral in New York, *Memoria* was performed by Gary DeLoatch in memory of Alvin.

The impressive and unusual dancing and technique of Katherine Dunham had been an Ailey cornerstone since he first saw her perform as a young man. In 1987, Ailey presented *The Magic of Katherine Dunham*, an entire program honoring her work. Dunning notes an unrealized career long dream was to choreograph a major work about Malcolm X. However, the “heroes he did celebrate were Martin Luther King, Nelson and Winnie Mandela, Charlie Parker, and friends and neighbors of his childhood” (1996, 306).

- Pressures Build with Company Success

Alvin’s personal life was complex, and revolved very much around the Theater and his demanding schedule. Ailey was overtly gay, at times quite socially active, but had few relationships that lasted. He could be intensely private, lonely, and at times remained detached from his colleagues and friends. Ailey’s talents endeared him to many and he displayed a wide range of emotions. “Everyone was his friend and he was a friend to all in his daily life, from stray animals to dancers he might abuse emotionally but cared greatly for and worried about. In turn, he was genuinely loved by even the most casual of acquaintances—so warm and funny and perceptive that he was irresistible (1996, 336). In 1980 he suffered a breakdown and was briefly hospitalized. Ailey’s perseverance enabled him to recover and continue to lead the company until he died of aids in 1989.

- The Ailey Legacy

As a black modern dancer and artistic director, Alvin Ailey pioneered lasting change that would be carried forward by those who loved him and shared his passion. Present Artistic Director Judith Jamison, was chosen by Alvin to lead the company shortly before his death. An extremely accomplished artist and choreographer, she has taken the company to soaring heights that clearly would make Alvin proud. Alvin, her “spiritual walker”, inspired her to continue the tradition of artistic excellence that is the signature of the Ailey Company and School. As Miss Jamison, imparted at Alvin’s funeral in The Cathedral of St. John the Devine: “Alvin gave me legs until I could stand on my own as a dancer and a
choreographer.” “He made us believe we could fly…He gave me my wings, I sat on his wings and would fly” (1996, 407-408).

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is still flying. Under Jamison’s direction, the company has continued to develop new works by emerging choreographers, including a Women’s Choreography Initiative. The Company’s varied repertoire includes works by Talley Beatty, Donald Byrd, John Butler, Ulysses Dove, Katherine Dunham, Lar Lubovitch, Donald McKayle, Elisa Monte, Jennifer Muller, Pearl Primus, Brenda Way, Billy Wilson, director Judith Jamison and many others. From 1958, heralded as an international ambassador of American culture, the company has performed for 67 million people in 48 states, 45 countries and 6 continents (1996, 388).

To appreciate the wealth of Ailey’s contribution to American dance, it is important to understand other areas his work influenced both directly and otherwise. Alvin wanted a company that could do everything, and was particularly committed to providing opportunities for black dancers, in an interracial setting. As Clive Barnes writes:

“Ailey is black and proud of it. But he understands that the African culture is as much part of American life as European culture. He is no black apologist of apartheid, and I love him for it. Today his nonblack dancers can keep up in his company’s idiom, which, for the most part, is Afro-American. As a result—and I wouldn’t stress this but rather take it as it comes—every performance he gives is the greatest lesson in race relations you are going to get in a month of Sundays.”

Ailey’s commitment to give black and white choreographers the chance to present their work reinforced this, and ensured that his dancers would be exceedingly versatile. Throughout his career, Ailey addressed disenfranchisement, and worked to create more equity. His voice and the power of his ballets, helped create a stronger climate of acceptance. Hip Hop, which started as sub-culture break dancers invented their own means of expression, originated from the streets of New York during the 1970s. Now a mainstream art form with wide popular appeal, it is in its own right a dance and music culture of the disenfranchised. As Ailey’s genius was eventually accepted, it is interesting that the Hip Hop artist Wy Clef Jean is making his Carnegie Hall debut on Friday January 19, 2001 and accompanying him will be 16 “Clef Kids”, or young musicians of his from the streets of New Jersey. Times have changed, and the link may be removed, but the idea that an exceptionally talented African American male artist employing a “group of kids off the streets” is recognizably similar. As Ailey traced black culture in Revelations and Cry, and Savion Glover and his company of Bring In Da Noise, Bring In’ Da Funk documented and celebrated slavery to the urban black experience through tap dance, Wy Clef Jean is now introducing contemporary themes at Carnegie Hall. In each case their art and voices are different, yet the thread of their own experience runs remains powerfully strong.

In conclusion, Alvin Ailey’s vision, passion, and personal resolve were huge, but without the collective contributions of many important friends and colleagues, the building of the Ailey Company and school would not have been possible. To discuss and do justice to the many individuals who dedicated themselves to help Alvin realize his dream is beyond the scope of
this overview. However, suffice it to say they were crucial in lending their talents, love, and support to this unusual man who captured their hearts and guided their spirits. Ailey’s work lives on and resonates around the world because he imbued his dances with a universal humanity. Judith Jamison in her book *Dancing Spirit*, said:

> You must spring from honesty. What makes the Ailey company so special is that it’s filled with dancers who are people first, who happen to have the gift of dance. They are in touch with the honesty of who they really are and I insist that they remember why they wanted to dance in the first place…If you can remember that, you’re in business because you’ll just rekindle the flame.

> That’s why we do outreach in the schools, and have miniperformances to turn our young people on, not just to dance, but to *life*” (1993, 252-253).

Through every day life, Ailey found Martha Graham’s “inspiration” and made it into his own. His genius was his ability to share his joy and anguish through the dance. Alvin Ailey, and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater gives us reason to celebrate. It all started with Alvin, and as if we are saying “thank you”—let’s reach with raised chins, strong voices, and outstretched hands, boldly for the sky.
Spirituals

The following sections (Spirituals, a Dancer’s Life, and the Magic of Ailey Dance) are reprinted from the Interdisciplinary Partnership Project in Arts Education by Cal Performances, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and Verda Delp, education consultant and English teacher at the Willard Middle School, Berkeley. Used by permission from the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater.

Music is very much a part of their spiritual and social life. Spirituals are folk songs that are sung both in church and informally outside of the church, to describe events in the Bible or
personal religious experiences. Some of you may sing spirituals in church; others may know spirituals that have become part of our common social and musical language.

Spirituals trace their origins to African music, and although they have evolved over time, many remain unchanged since they were conceived over 300 years ago.

Culture is portable. People bring their culture with them wherever they go. So too, did the Africans who were brought to the United State on slave ships beginning in the 1700’s. This event produced a powerful legacy, musical and otherwise. Many of the slaves left no record of their lives. (In the South it was not until around World War II that the birth of African Americans was recorded systematically.). Music however, traveled across the continents, and African chants, drums and rhythms, were transplanted to American soil.

In the early 1800s, a slave-ship captain named Theodore Canot described how the slaves kept their music alive even as they journeyed to unknown fates in the United States, then still called the New World:

“During afternoons of serene weather, men, women, girls, and boys are allowed walk on the deck to unite in African melodies which they always enhance by extemporaneous tom-tom on the bottom of a tub or tin kettle.”

Music was one of the only ways the slaves could unite in their sorrow and fear, for they did not often share a common language. The salves who arrived at the African slave markets came from tribes all over Africa, and they were thrown together in the slave ships without regard for tribe or language. In fact, slave-ship captains made a point of separating slaves from the same tribes, for if the slaves had been able to talk with one another, they also might have been able to plan revolts. Through the rhythms of their drums, they communicated their calls to rebellion. Between 1699 and 1845, there were at least fifty-five revolts aboard slave ships. Most of them failed, but they caused enough damage to make the insurance companies that wrote policies fro slave ships offer a special form of coverage against insurrections aboard slave ships.

For those who survived the ocean voyage to the New World, the power of the drums continued. Many slave masters did not realize that the drums the slaves made from hollowed-out logs or nail kegs, with animal skins tightly stretched over one end, were a form of communication. The drumbeats became a sort of “Morse code” which the slaves used to plan revolts or escapes. Therefore, there were several years during the time of slavery when it was against the law to drum.

This did not stop the music though. The slaves began to use their feet, their bodies, spoons, washboards and invented other make-shift rhythmic possibilities. This is how tap dance and other forms of dance and music were born.

The Africans also introduced new instruments to America. Among the first, besides the drum, were the bones. These were actually animal bones that had been cleaned and allowed to dry white in the sun. When played expertly, they made a wonderful clackety-clack sound.
to accompany the drum or heel rhythms the slaves produced. More familiar to us today is the banjo. In Africa, it is called a bania or banju. In 1784, Thomas Jefferson wrote about an intriguing instrument used by his slaves that he called a banjar. Made by the slaves, the instrument did not have frets; but it was shaped the same way as banjos are today, and it had strings and was strummed in the same way as banjos.

Many Africans were forced to abandon their religions and convert to those practiced in the New World. Many embraced the new religions, which offered a better place – heaven – after this life on earth. In Louisiana, which had first been settled by the Spanish and the French, they converted to Catholicism. In Virginia, South Carolina, Alabama, and Georgia, settled first by the English, the Methodist and Baptist churches were strong, and since they allowed much singing in their services, the slaves were able to incorporate their own love of song into their newfound faiths. Out of this mingling of slave culture and Protestant culture came the songs called spirituals.

There is much evidence that the slaves learned to give double meaning to the religious songs they sang. Quite a few Negro spirituals contain messages that white slave masters did not suspect and certainly did not anticipate. They were often called sorrow songs, because they expressed the deep suffering the slaves endured and their yearning for redemption and peace in heaven. Sorrow songs exist in other cultures as well.

Spirituals were also a way for the slave to communicate with each other – to plan meetings, to help escaped slaves, and to remind one another that there was hope for freedom. The spiritual “Deep River,” for example, was sung to announce a meeting at the river:

Deep river
My home is over Jordan, yes
Deep river, Lord,
I want to cross over into camp ground.

When a slave had run away and the master had discovered his absence, the other slaves on the plantation might sing “Wade in the Water.” Slaves on neighboring plantations would hear the song and take it up, and the runaway, wherever he was, would know that he should take to the river so the bloodhounds would not be able to follow his scent:

Wade in the water, wade in the water.
Children, God going to trouble the water.

“Wade in the Water” is part of the music that you will hear in Alvin Ailey’s “Revelations.”

It is no accident that after the Underground Railroad began, slaves in the South took to singing a spiritual called “The Gospel Train.” The Underground Railroad was a route from the South to Canada and freedom, a route marked by homes that would take in runaways and provide them with places to sleep, food, clothing, and help in traveling to the next “station.” Part of the spiritual went:
*The gospel train is coming*
*I hear it just at hand—*
*I hear the car wheels moving,*
*And —rumbling thro’ the land.*
*Get on board—children,*
*Get on board.*

While the slaves used their drums and drumlike sound and their spirituals to work against their masters and for their own freedom, most of the music of the slaves was used to make life more bearable, to restore their spirits, to inspire courage, and to enjoy the little free time they had.

When the slaves labored, they sang work songs. They made up songs about picking cotton, and harvesting sugarcane, and loading and unloading ships on the docks. In this, they were not very different from other groups of workers who shared a tradition of music and singing. English and Irish sailors sang sea chanteys as they worked. The slaves had a special form of singing, known as the call-and-response form, that all individuals to make up new verses and then to be answered by the group. They group acted like a chorus.

This call-and-response form evolved musically, and became a deep expression of joy and suffering which we now know as gospel music.
Looking at Dance

The choreography the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Ailey presents synthesizes a number of important elements. To understand these components and how they work together to create what you see on stage, reviewing the following terms will be useful:

Part I: Understanding dancers

Clothing: Dancers traditionally wear leotards and tights. These tight fitting garments allow teachers, choreographers, and the dancers to study and correct their lines without distraction. Different costumes are chosen by choreographers to enhance performance pieces and are specially constructed to not inhibit the dancers ability to move.
Line: Dancers create different lines or shapes with their entire body. Good line extends forever beyond the extremities of the dancer and helps to give them a presence on stage. This aspect of a dancer’s technique draws you in and makes you want to watch them.

Turnout: When dancers rotate the legs from the hip, which is learned in classical ballet, they are able to execute difficult movement with speed, balance, balon (a springing quality) and apparent ease.

Parallel: Used in many ethnic dance styles, and developed by modern dancers to expand the movement vocabulary, parallel line offers the choreographer and dancer a different ways to present movement. In contemporary choreography often both parallel and turned-out movement are utilized.

Form, pictures, or shapes: Shapes created by dancers can be still or moving. These pictures are made from the dancers’ vocabulary and like sentences are joined together making movement phrases.

Musicality: Not all dancing is performed to music, but good dancers learn or inherently know how to move with a natural rhythm. Whether dances move to music or in silence, how a dancer phrases the movement helps it to become their own.

Phrasing: Like musicians, dancers emphasize certain movements more than others. Good phrasing is inherently logical and will help to promote or accent the story line or structure of the piece.

Level: There are three basic levels in dance: low (on the floor), middle (walking or moving about the floor), and high (when dancers rise high on their forced arch (demi-pointe), jump in the air, or are suspended or lifted by another person(s) or a prop). By changing levels, dancers vary both movement and movement phrases. Modern and ethnic movement is traditionally more grounded and into the floor, whereas classical ballet seeks to defy gravity and appear light and effortless.

Energy, presence: Dancers communicate their personalities or ideas through movement by the energy they give to the audience. Like music, this energy can be strong, soft, bold, subtle, etc. How dancers control and vary their energy helps them blend beautifully in with others to form exceptional corps (group) dancing, or stand out as a soloist. Mastering both ensemble and soloist work is an important part of a dancers’ education and craft.

Part II: Understanding the Choreographic Process

Choreographer: A person who composes or creates dances.

Choreography: The dance composition, ballet, work, or piece, that a choreographer creates.

Unison movement: When a group of dancers dance the same material at the same time. The strength of ensemble or corps work is in the ability of the group to dance as “one.”
Ensemble: The unison movement of a group of dancers.

Solo: The performance of a single person.

Duet (Pas de Deux): When two dancers perform together.

Juxtaposition: when singular movement phrases are performed by different dancers simultaneously.

Repertoire: The list of works that a company is prepared to perform.

Repertory Company: A dance company that performs many types of works by many different choreographers.

Part III: Dance Styles Studied and Performed by the Alvin Ailey Company

- Modern Dance – focuses on combing dynamic movement expressing the beauty and strength of human bodies, diverse personalities and intense emotion. This creates exhilarating, organic movement including deep contractions, or curves and sharp angles.

- Horton technique – created by Lester Horton; a modern dance technique that explores how many different ways the body can move. He names these movements Studies. Some of the studies are for balance, some are to fortify (strengthen) and some are to work on the swinging action of the body. In the Horton technique, the dancer tries to sue as much space as possible, turning, bending and jumping sideways, backward and even upside down. The shapes created are clear and linear. The quality of the movement is lyrical and includes varied dynamics. The Horton technique gives a feeling of strength and energy.

- Dunham technique – created by Katherine Dunham; the Dunham technique is a blend of the Caribbean, West African and Afro-American folk patterns of movement and rhythms. The technique has been devised to encompass the movements of the indigenous folk patterns of these cultures. The original dance patterns have been preserved. But the dances have been slightly altered in order to be more acceptable, choreographically speaking, to the modern dance concert and theater. The technique also employs the mediums of ballet, modern dance forms, jazz and basic folk patterns.

- Graham technique – created by Martha Graham; a dance technique that is based on the principle of contraction and release, movement which is similar to the act of breathing, creating a current of energy through the body; back appears rounded in a contraction and the chest is lifted in a release; movement itself is dramatic and expressive.
Ballet – a dance form which started in the royal courts of Europe; the body is held mostly upright and the legs are turned out from the hip; uses five basic positions of the feet; uses French as its’ language.

Alvin Ailey Talks About *Revelations*

“*Revelations* began with the music. As early as I can remember I was enthralled by the music played and sung in the small black churches in every small town my mother and I lived in. No matter where we were during those nomadic years Sunday was always a churchgoing day. There we would absorb some of the most glorious singing to be heard anywhere in the world.

With profound feeling, with faith, hope, joy, and sometimes sadness, the choirs, congregations, deacons, preachers, and ushers would sing black spirituals and gospel songs. They sang and played the music with such fervor that even as a small child I could not only hear it but almost see it. I remember hearing “Wade in the Water” being sung during baptism and hearing the pastor’s wife sing “I Been ‘Buked, I Been Scorned” one Sunday during testifying time. I tried to put all of that feeling into *Revelations*.”

From *Revelations*, The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey, with A. Peter Bailey
A Dancer’s Life

Dance is an art, but it is also a craft to be learned through years of hard work and training. All artists have their instruments or tools, and for the dancer that instrument is the body. Just as a great musician cannot make beautiful music without a sensitive, well-crafted instrument, so a dancer without a well-trained body will not be able to perform expressively. Ailey dancers are dedicated and extraordinary dancers. A dancer undergoes years of strenuous physical training. Each dancer has to acquire a strong ability in several dance techniques including Horton, Graham, Dunham and ballet. Dance involves the whole person – mind as well as body. A dancer without an intellectual, emotional and aesthetic understanding of his/her art remains a mere technician rather than an artist. Ms. Jamison asks her dancers “to bring their love of life to the stage…Otherwise you are just doing the steps…The commitment is to communicate with the audience.”

Most dancers begin their training at an early age before the body loses its flexibility. Girls usually start around seven or eight, while boys generally begin later, around ten or eleven. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Center offers classes for beginning students starting at age three in the First Steps Program.

As professional dancers, some Ailey dancers have performed with other dance companies prior to joining the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Many of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater dancers were students at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center and performed with the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble.

Rehearsal is an essential aspect of dancers lives. The rehearsals allow the dancers to internalize the sequence of steps, the emotion of the work and the characters that they are portraying. Masazumi Chaya oversees the rehearsals. Ms. Jamison attends rehearsals to fine tune and recall nuances from her early years as a dancer and as an assistant to Mr. Ailey. They keep the dancers and dances in the proper form. Often Mr. Chaya restages works for the company that haven’t been performed in many years. A rehearsal schedule is very demanding, often running from 10am – 8pm. Many company rehearsals begin with a company class in the morning to get the dancers “warmed up.” Then the actual rehearsal runs from about 12 noon to 7:30 at night. The dancers have a 1 hour break in the middle of the day for personal time.

In addition to rehearsal, the dancers must prepare for touring. The tours can range an average of 2-4 months. Therefore, the dancers must pack all items needed for the trip. These items can include clothes for the various climates (coats, shorts, shoes, dance clothes!), any hygiene items for the duration of the trip and passports (if traveling internationally) and other identification. The dancers must plan ahead and be very adaptable individuals. While on tour they must keep their minds and bodies in shape. They must be prepared to perform at top level each night. The dancers are careful about their food intake. It is important that they do
not eat heavy foods, yet they must eat goods that provide nutrients, vitamins and protein that they need to dance in 2 two-hour performances daily.

Overall the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater tours twenty-two weeks in a year on domestic and international tours. This is a wonderful opportunity for dancers to see the world, meet new people and perform in some of the best theaters in the world. Despite the long periods away from home, living out of suitcases, the dancers love what they do. They are artists of the highest caliber. They have spent their lives striving to obtain this opportunity, to be a member of the ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER, the most recognized dance company in the world.
The Magic of Ailey Dance

Before the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs there is an important process that takes place…

Part 1: The Creative Process

There are five fundamental elements in creating a dance. They are the foundation of the work that you see on stage. This process is a collaborative effort. The descriptions below should give you some insight into what is involved in the creation of a dance.

The Dance

The person who creates the dance, the sequence of steps and style of execution is the choreographer. The choreographer has ideas, concepts, images or emotions that he/she wants to convey to the audience. The choreographer makes all of the artistic decisions regarding what the work will consist of. Some choreographers create works that may include solos, duets, quintets, trios, and/or the entire company of dancers. For example, Trading, choreographed by Elisa Monte, is performed by a duet with a male and a female; Hymn, choreographed by Judith Jamison, uses the entire company. The choreographer consults the Artistic Director in casting the dancers into roles for each dance. The choreographer works with the dancers in rehearsal to teach the dance and to perfect the execution of the steps. Rehearsals range from two to eight weeks, so the dancers have to be very versatile, and must be able to adapt to many different techniques of dance.

The Music

Many choreographers commission a new piece of music from a composer. Sometimes, the choreographer selects an existing piece of music that inspires them or represents the images or concepts of the dance. Choreographers that have worked with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater have used existing music as well as commissioned works. For Revelations, Mr. Ailey used traditional Negro Spirituals. In Dance at the Gym, choreographed by Donald Byrd, the music was commissioned from composer and musician, Mio Morales.

The Costumes

A costume designer creates the designs for the costumes. The designer works very closely with the choreographer to ensure that the choreographer’s vision is reflected in the costumes. They choose the fabric, colors and the best method of construction that will allow the dancers to move easily. Once the designs are complete and the dancers are measured by the wardrobe staff, the measurements and designs are sent to a costume construction company for assembly.

The Sets

The set designer creates the design for props and sets. Props and sets are used in a variety of ways in the dance. Most sets create the décor for the dance. Props are items
that the dancers use in the dance. The props and sets should reflect the
choreographer’s vision and compliment the choreography. Props can range from the
umbrella, stools and fans in Revelations to the long red cloth used in Hymn.

Lighting

The lighting designer creates a design using lights, color and special effects. Most
dances use many light at once to create the mood on stage. This designer also works
very closely with the choreographer and all the other designers to create an
atmosphere that enhances the dance. The lighting designer has to ensure that his/her
ideas will coincide with the choreographer’s vision. Once the idea is developed, it ahhs
to be put into a written format: the lighting plot. This plot informs the lighting
technicians where the lights should be hung and how they are wired.

Once the choreography and designs are set and the dancers rehearse, the dance is
ready to be performed. But there are many other people involved in getting the
dancers onstage and who make the performance happen.

Part 2: Production Staff

Behind the scenes with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is a world full of
career opportunities…

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has a full production staff that works very
hard before and during the performance to create the presentation that you see on-
stage. On tour, the production crew carries all of the equipment and costumes for
approximately twenty-two works. The constant challenge is to create the theatrical
image on-stage for the audiences while maintaining a professional working
atmosphere backstage.

Production Manager

The production manager oversees the production aspects of the Company on tour.
She/he contacts the theaters to determine if they have the necessary equipment,
facilities and staff needed for the performance, in addition to accommodating the
equipment the Company carries. Arrangements are made with each theater to provide
a stage crew, dressing rooms, and a front of house staff to be available upon the
Company’s arrival. At each theater, the production manager is responsible for the
load-in and load-out.

Stage Manager

The stage manager is responsible for the entire performance. He/she is the supervisor
of the crew and dancers. When the crew arrives at the theater in the morning, the
stage manager divides the crew into specific work groups. Each group will work with
the supervisor of each area to complete the tasks. In addition, he/she creates the daily
schedule and dressing room assignments, posting them with the sign-in sheet on the
call board for everyone to check-in. During the performance, the stage manager calls
the cues for each dance.
Resources

Selected Readings and Sources:

Video Resources:

Video for Classroom Use includes:

- **Hymn to Alvin Ailey** — Judith Jamison (opening) 4 minutes
- **Revelations** — Alvin Ailey (excerpt from Third Movement: *Move Members Move*) 4 minutes
- **I Am From** — Josie Moseley
  a. Opening 6 minutes
  b. Kristen
  c. Jonte
- **Blood Memories** – interview with Alvin Ailey 4 minutes
- **Revelations** – Alvin Ailey (excerpt from First Movement: *Pilgrims of Sorrow*) 4 minutes
- **Hymn to Alvin Ailey** — Judith Jamison (St. John the Divine) 4 minutes

The following complete works are recommended for classroom viewing:

- **Eyes on the Prize**
    - Introduction (first 5 minutes) – an outstanding overview of the civil rights movement. It gives a contextual baseline to Ailey’s work.
    - The Lynching of Emmett Till (15 minutes) – discretion advised.
    - Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott, with Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King (20 minutes) – excellent footage.
  o Part 2: “America at a Racial Crossroads (1965-1985)”
    - Boston Busing – the ramifications of Brown vs. the Board of Education (enforcement of school busing, highlighting the inequities of public education).

Blackside Inc. (Boston, MA) has exclusive rights to the footage and we are not allowed to reproduce the “Eyes on the Prize” series for classroom use. However, copies are available at the public libraries and could be shared by nearby buildings. I highly recommend that students view at least the first five minutes of “Awakenings.”

- **Dorothy Counts**—Josie Moseley. A young black girl enters an all white North Carolina high school. Choreographed for the School of Oregon Ballet Theatre in 1998, from events that took place in 1963, as described in a voice over interview with Julian Bond. The role of Dorothy Counts is performed by Lincoln HS senior Jessica Wyatt. Approximately 8 minutes in length.