



Ailey, Alvin (1931-1989)

by Douglas Blair Turnbaugh

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As a dancer, Alvin Ailey was noted for his sexual charisma. Lena Horne famously described him as "like a young lion and yet like an earth man." But he achieved international acclaim as a choreographer. His company has performed before an estimated 15,000,000 people in 48 states and 45 countries.

Ailey was born on January 5, 1931 in direst poverty in the Brazos Valley of Texas. His father abandoned him and his mother three months later.

At various stages of his life Ailey had to contend with racism, homophobia, issues of political correctness, exploitative sexual partners, and venal management. In the face of all these obstacles, he triumphed as a creative genius. But homophobia, especially that of his mother, undermined his sense of worth as a man and helped make his personal life a tragedy.

When Ailey was a child, he moved with his mother to Los Angeles, where she secured work in an aircraft factory. School was a haven for him. He spent long hours in the library, reading and writing poetry. The large, solidly built boy who looked like fullback material managed to avoid contact sports--and avoid being stigmatized as a sissy--by taking up gymnastics.

At the age of 18, Ailey caught the eye of Lester Horton, a white dancer, teacher, and choreographer who had created in Los Angeles the first multi-racial dance company in the United States. With Horton, Ailey found an emotional home and quickly learned dance styles and techniques from classical ballet to Native American dance. He performed in Horton's company and found work in Hollywood films and eventually succeeded Horton as director upon the latter's death in 1953.

For the first two years that Ailey danced with the Lester Horton company, he kept his life in dance a secret from his mother. When she first came to his dressing room and saw him in stage makeup, she slapped his face.

Ailey moved to New York in 1954 to dance on Broadway. He appeared in *House of Flowers* (1954), with Harry Belafonte in *Sing, Man, Sing* (1956), and with Lena Horne in *Jamaica* (1957). He also studied with teachers such as Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, and Karel Shook, while beginning to choreograph pieces of his own.

In 1957, Ailey formed his own group, which presented its inaugural concert on March 30, 1958. Among the dances premiered in that concert was his *Blues Suite*, a work deriving from blues songs that expresses the pain and anger of African Americans. With its combination of ballet, modern dance, jazz, and black dance techniques, plus flamboyant theatricality and intense emotional appeal, *Blues Suite* was an instant success and defined Ailey's particular genius.

In 1960, for his company's third season Ailey created his masterpiece, *Revelations*. Based on African-



Alvin Ailey in 1955.
Photograph by Carl van Vechten, March 22, 1955.
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American spirituals and gospel music, it is perhaps the most popular ballet created in the twentieth century.

While Ailey continued to choreograph for his own company, he created dances for other companies as well. For example, in 1973 he created *Ariadne* for the Harkness Ballet, with Maria Tallchief in the title role; and in 1983 he devised *Precipice* for the Paris Opera Ballet.

Ailey was proud that his company was multi-racial. On the one hand, he wanted to give black dancers, who had often been discriminated against by other dance companies, an opportunity to dance; but he also wanted to transcend the issue of "negritude," what in later years would be called Black pride. His company employed dancers, composers, and choreographers of all hues based entirely on their artistic talent.

While Ailey was pleased that the U.S. State Department sponsored his company's first overseas tour in 1962, he suspected that the sponsors' motives were propagandistic rather than altruistic as they wanted to demonstrate that "a modern Negro dance group" could flourish in the United States.

Ailey was profoundly honored when the American Ballet Theatre commissioned *The River* (1970), to music of Duke Ellington. He looked upon the commission as an opportunity to work with some of the best ballet dancers in the world, particularly with the great dramatic ballerina Sally Wilson. However, he was deeply disappointed when ABT insisted that the leading male role be danced by the only black man in the company, who was a conspicuously mediocre dancer.

Although his company was sometimes described as patriarchal, with male dancers the center of attention, Ailey was also known for fostering the careers of several important female dancers, most notably Judith Jamison, who debuted with the company in 1965 and who spoke of Ailey as a great teacher. One of Ailey's great successes was *Cry* (1971), which he dedicated to his mother and black women everywhere and which became a signature piece for Jamison.

Ailey was a loving man, who was adored by many devoted friends and who functioned as a father figure to his dancers. However, his personal and professional lives were dogged with problems. Abused by lovers, he seemed in later life to enjoy the company of street hustlers. Similarly, he entrusted management and money matters to people who victimized him.

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater did not secure a permanent home and stable management until 1979, when the company and school moved into splendid facilities in the Broadway theater district of Manhattan. But by this time, Ailey had become erratic. He was addicted to cocaine, increasingly crippled by arthritis, and dependent on lithium as a mood regulator.

Like many men of his generation, including Jerome Robbins, for example, Ailey was deeply ashamed of his homosexuality. For years, he refused to consider writing an autobiography because "my mother wouldn't like it." When he finally did collaborate on an autobiography, it was sexually sanitized, notwithstanding the fact that it was to be published posthumously. To spare his mother the social stigma of his death of AIDS in 1989, Ailey asked his doctor to announce that he had died of terminal blood dyscrasia.

Although the choreographer could sincerely dance "I've been 'buked and I've been scorned," he nevertheless managed to celebrate the beauty of his heritage and translate his pain into art. His ballets embody his aspirations for all-encompassing love and compassion. They still rock the soul of a worldwide audience.

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