

Alvin Ailey, Jr. - Julinda Lewis Ferguson (1994)

C H A P T E R F O U R

PRESENTING THE
ALVIN AILEY
AMERICAN DANCE
THEATER, 'IN
WHICH MEN ARE
MEN AND THE
WOMEN ARE
FRANKLY
DELIGHTED
ABOUT IT'

Little did Ailey suspect that that first performance at the 92nd Street Y would be the start of a thirty-year career. It is unlikely that Ailey had any intention of establishing a permanent company at this early date. Directing a company, as he well knew from his apprenticeship with and subsequent leadership of the Lester Horton dancers, was a difficult job. It was like being the father of a large family that required a home and emotional and financial support.

Rehearsal space—somewhere for the choreographers and dancers to prepare their work—had to be

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found. Dancers often were not paid for rehearsal time, but the musicians who worked with them had to be, as did landlords. Materials for costumes, props, and scenery had to be bought, costumes had to be sewn and stage sets built. Running a dance company requires an enormous amount of behind-the-scenes preparation and planning that is invisible to the audience.

It is not unusual for dancers to practice for months for the opportunity to perform in one of the many short-lived weekend programs, such as those produced at the 92nd Street Y. Many dancers hold other jobs, working for other choreographers, doing office work, or working in restaurants. Some are writers or teachers. Some attend school.

Some of Ailey's dancers were employed in Broadway shows. They would rehearse with Ailey for up to three hours a day, then race to their other jobs. The group would disband after completing a performance or series of performances, and the dancers would start the whole hectic routine all over again when a new program was being developed.

In 1958, money was not readily available to support the arts. (As dance became more popular in the 1960s and 1970s, government and private grants became more widely available to choreographers and dance companies.) But given the economic conditions of the time, many dancers performed on bare stages, with little or no scenery, and often wore simple black leotards or other nondescript clothing. Ailey had been influ-

enced by the total theatrical experience of Lester Horton and by the colorful costumes and spectacular staging of Katherine Dunham's dancers. So Ailey and Geoffrey Holder constructed costumes from old curtains and from items found in used-clothing stores. They made stage decor and props from other found materials, things for which other people had little use anymore. Friends, rather than professional designers, helped with the sewing.

Yet none of these difficulties kept Ailey from soon preparing for a second concert, also at the 92nd Street Y. This, the first to feature a full evening of Ailey's own works, took place on December 21, 1958. The successful *Blues Suite* was on the program once again, along with *Cinco Latinos*, which was a suite of Latin dances. There was also a new work for featured guest artist Carmen de Lavallade called *Ariette Oubliée*. Critic P. W. Manchester wrote about this second performance in the February 1959 issue of *Dance News*.

After so many modern dance performances in which dancers drift about with blank faces and a general neutralization that denies the existence of sex even in the midst of the most complex entwining, how refreshing to enter the stage world created by Alvin Ailey, in which the men are men and the women are frankly delighted about it.

As a result of these two successes, Ailey's group was invited to perform at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Fes-

tival during the summer of 1959. Just five years before, an inexperienced Ailey had failed to impress the festival's director after taking over the direction of the Horton company. This time, with more experience and several good reviews to his credit, he met with more success. With things going so well, a third concert at the 92nd Street Y was planned for January 31, 1960.

The dancers were still not a formal company; many performers came and went as their work schedules allowed. Dancers would carry costumes and props about with them as they moved from one temporary rehearsal space to another. When the group began a tour of the eastern United States, bringing Ailey's dances to new audiences, friends loaded their cars with dancers, costumes, props, lights, and whatever else was needed to set up a performance. The idea of a permanent company, a showcase primarily for the works of black choreographers, was beginning to take shape.

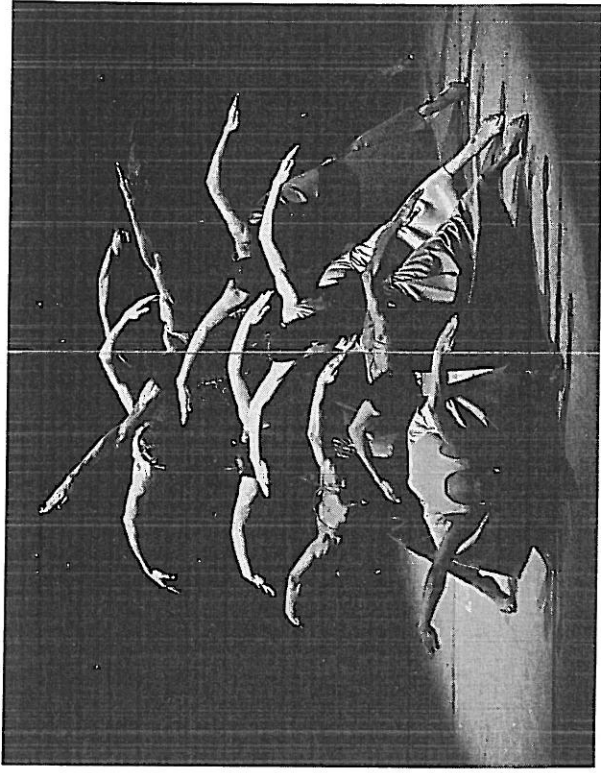
For the January 1960 performance at the 92nd Street Y, the Ailey dancers continued the Latin theme of *Redondo* and *Cinco Latinos* with a Latin American suite called *Sonera*. *Sonera* consisted of three dances that attempted to combine ballet and ethnic dance forms. The group also performed *La Création du monde* ("The Creation of the World"), which Ailey had originally choreographed in 1954 for the Lester Horton dancers. But the most talked-about work on the program was the new *Revelations*.

Ailey used images from both personal experience

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and the book of Revelations in the Bible. These are most apparent in the baptism scene and in the final section, when the church ladies, in their wide-brimmed hats, use their fans to communicate and to flirt as well as to gain relief from the oppressive Southern heat. The skills Ailey had learned under the tutelage of Lester Horton, the inspiration he had received from watching the works of Katherine Dunham, and the traditional music he had grown up hearing in the black church all helped Ailey present a story from the African-American cultural experience. He stunned and delighted his audience.

Originally performed in three parts, the dance opened with "Pilgrim of Sorrow," which featured a wedge-shaped formation of dancers, hands outstretched in a way that symbolizes both humble prayer and hope. Two long strips of fabric were unfurled across the stage to represent the water in a riverside baptism scene, "Take Me to the Water." The dancers' fluid movements made them appear to be floating. Simply adorned with white umbrellas and long, slender poles or reeds with scraps of fabric rippling in the breeze made by the flitting dancers provide an elegant, festive atmosphere while not requiring elaborate sets and expensive materials. These tricks of the trade were influenced by Horton and necessity. The final scene, "Move, Members, Move," had ladies in Sunday hats vigorously fanning themselves in a fond parody of the black Southern Baptist church.



Opening scene from *Revelations*, 1979 performance. (Photo by Jack Vartoogian)

By most accounts, even at this first performance of *Revelations* the audience began to clap along with the music. At the end they stood up and cheered and demanded more. This type of enthusiastic audience reaction apparently was rather unusual at the 92nd Street Y. Ailey's dancers were scheduled for a return engagement—something that was unheard-of at the time—the very next month. Reviews and word of mouth spread the news of this exciting work. Alvin Ailey was no longer an unknown new choreographer. But his fledgling company—the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater—still had no place to call home.

In 1960, the YWCA on Fifty-first Street and Eighth Avenue opened the Clark Center for the Per-

forming Arts in the former Capitol Hotel. Charles Blackwell, a friend of Ailey's who was then the stage manager for *Jamaica*, had seen Ailey's rehearsals and was impressed. He approached Adele Holtz, the director of the Clark Center, and told her about Ailey's work. By October of that year, Holtz had been persuaded of the company's potential. Ailey's group became the Clark Center's resident dance company.

The company now had a home, a place to study and rehearse, a place to meet and plan, a place to store its costumes and props, and a place to grow. In exchange for their space, Ailey and his company members taught dance classes to children and adults and held seminars at which interested people could learn more about dance and choreography. And the center included a little theater where Ailey and other choreographers presented their work. Now people could really begin to take notice.

In 1962, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was selected to be a part of the President's Special International Program for Cultural Presentations. Established by President Kennedy, this program was somewhat like the Peace Corps, which Kennedy had established in 1961 to promote world peace and friendship. While the Peace Corps brought education and skills to underdeveloped countries, the cultural program aimed to encourage understanding of other people's cultures, with the goal of working toward world peace.

For their first tour, the company was sent to perform in Southeast Asia and Australia for about thirteen weeks. The dancers were constantly on the move and had very little time to see much of the places they visited. But the audiences, even those who spoke different languages and those who had never before seen black Americans performing on the concert dance stage, were full of praise for the dancers and for Ailey's choreography.

It was not unusual for black American artists to receive greater acclaim in foreign countries than they did in the United States. Other African-American dancers, musicians, writers, and visual artists had moved to Europe in order to achieve recognition for their work and escape the racism they faced in their own country.

During the 1962-63 performing season, Ailey's company went to Brazil. In 1964, the company toured various colleges around the United States, visited Paris and London in their first tour of Europe, and then returned to Australia, representing the U.S. Department of State. Word of the group's success in Europe and Australia reached home and increased the company's popularity. In 1965 they went back to Europe; then again in 1966, only to get stranded in Italy when some performances were canceled and the group ran out of money. Through some hastily made arrangements, they were able to leave Italy and go to Senegal, in West Africa, where they represented the United

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States in the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar. The group toured West Africa the following year.

All this touring meant the dancers had more work, and the company became more permanent. Dancers no longer left after each performance or series of performances to return to full-time jobs. Dancing became their full-time job, with shorter and shorter periods of unemployment between the performances and touring engagements. When the company was at home, many of the troupe's members taught dance classes at Clark Center or at other dance schools.

Ailey was now being hired or commissioned to choreograph dances for other companies. In 1962 he created *Feast of Ashes* for the Joffrey Ballet. Four years later he created three works for the Harkness ballet, *Ariadne*, *Macumba*, and *El Amor brujo*. In 1966 he also choreographed *Anthony and Cleopatra* for the reopening of the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center in New York City.

As Ailey grew in stature as an artist, he was able to collaborate on projects with other artists whose works he admired or had been inspired by. In 1963 he began collaborating with the great jazz composer Duke Ellington on *The River*, a work commissioned by American Ballet Theater. He also worked with Ellington on the dance *Reflections in D*.

In the midst of all this creativity and traveling, Ailey remained aware of what was happening in the world around him. One of the plays in which he per-



THE ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATRE

Members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater posing in costume for *Blues Suite*, Paris, 1964, include Alvin Ailey, reclining. (Uncredited press photo)

formed in 1961, *Call Me By My Rightful Name*, dealt with the issue of racism.

In June 1963 the Ailey company performed a benefit concert for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which worked for civil rights in the South. In 1964, while touring the southern United States, Ailey's company had to be careful to avoid the Ku Klux Klan, an organization that, among other activities, was working to prevent black Americans from registering to vote. "All my work, to some extent or other, is a cry against racism, against the injustice of that period," Ailey said in a December 1988 interview for the *New York Daily News Magazine*.

By the mid-1960s, Alvin Ailey was in his thirties and had become a well-respected choreographer whose responsibilities as the director of a popular dance company left him with little time to dance himself. In addition, he was a cultural ambassador, bringing American art to America's foreign friends. He had amassed a number of impressive credits both on Broadway and off, and he created works for other companies. Now, he began to focus more of his time and attention on choreography and on the administrative details of his growing organization.

'DANCE RIOT IN BROOKLYN'

Having a dance company. That is the great struggle, that has been the challenge of 30 years. Keeping it all together is still the problem, the constant battle to afford the engagements, the designers, the choreographers, to pay the dancers a decent wage. You have to keep proving that you have a right to exist. Even after all this time, I still have the feeling that it's not permanent, that at any moment something might happen.

—Alvin Ailey, 1988

In 1967, Ailey's business manager, Ivy Clarke, helped create the Dance Theater Foundation, a nonprofit organization whose purpose was to help the company secure public and private funding. By 1968, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater had received grants from the privately endowed Rockefeller