

Prima Movers - The Makers of Modern Dance in
America, Joseph H. Mazo, 1977

NIKOLAIS, AILEY, TAYLOR / 243

concerned with environment, the audience cannot escape a continuing awareness of the tools that create the environment. He sometimes seems to be dominated by his materials, rather than to dominate them. He has, however, understood the major concerns of his time and found a way to portray them. His dancers move within a man-made world that is sometimes beautiful and sometimes terrifying. They frequently seem to be transmuted by that world, to be badly mauled and defeated by it, to be so fully dominated by it that normal emotion is banished from their lives. Yet Nikolais' wit somehow makes the universe endurable, and gives the audience an optimistic belief that they, too, will survive.

Alvin Ailey brings people into the dance theater who might not be there without him. He presents energetic, exciting, enticing dancing decked out in all the hoopla of show business: Settings, sexy costumes, music of many kinds, carefully plotted lighting. He is the only important entrepreneur of modern dance who will present programs made up of a work in the balletic idiom, another in a modern style, and a third made in jazz technique. Furthermore, he consistently programs as part of his regular repertory the works of other modern choreographers.

"I think that dance should primarily be entertainment," he told Marian Horosko during a taped interview in 1965. "The audience is more likely to get the message more easily if it hears something like 'Good Morning, Blues,' or 'The House of the Rising Sun' . . . It's a visual theater and an oral theater . . . beautiful people, beautifully dressed, doing beautiful and meaningful things."

Ailey is not to be reckoned a great choreographer in the company of Graham, Humphrey, and Cunningham, although one of his works, *Revelations* (1960), is indisputably a masterpiece, and one or two others come fairly close. He has manufactured a sizable assemblage of dances, of which some are quite good, some more than competent, and some better off forgotten. (It is too easy to forget that even the greatest artists produce their fair share of embarrassments. No artist's contribution can be measured by his single greatest effort or most remarkable failure. It is the canon of work, and the contribution to the progress of the art that counts.) As Ailey and his company have become solidly established as a group that gives regular performances for a middle-class, paying public, the choreographer has been accused, with some justification, of becoming too slick, too self-conscious, and too much a salesman of dance. Yet his salesmanship is never of the "A dollar down, a dollar when I catch

you" variety. He stands behind his product, and his pitch is the same one employed by Ruth St. Denis in her vaudeville days—kinesthetic excitement, theatrical trappings, sensuality, and a touch of the exotic.

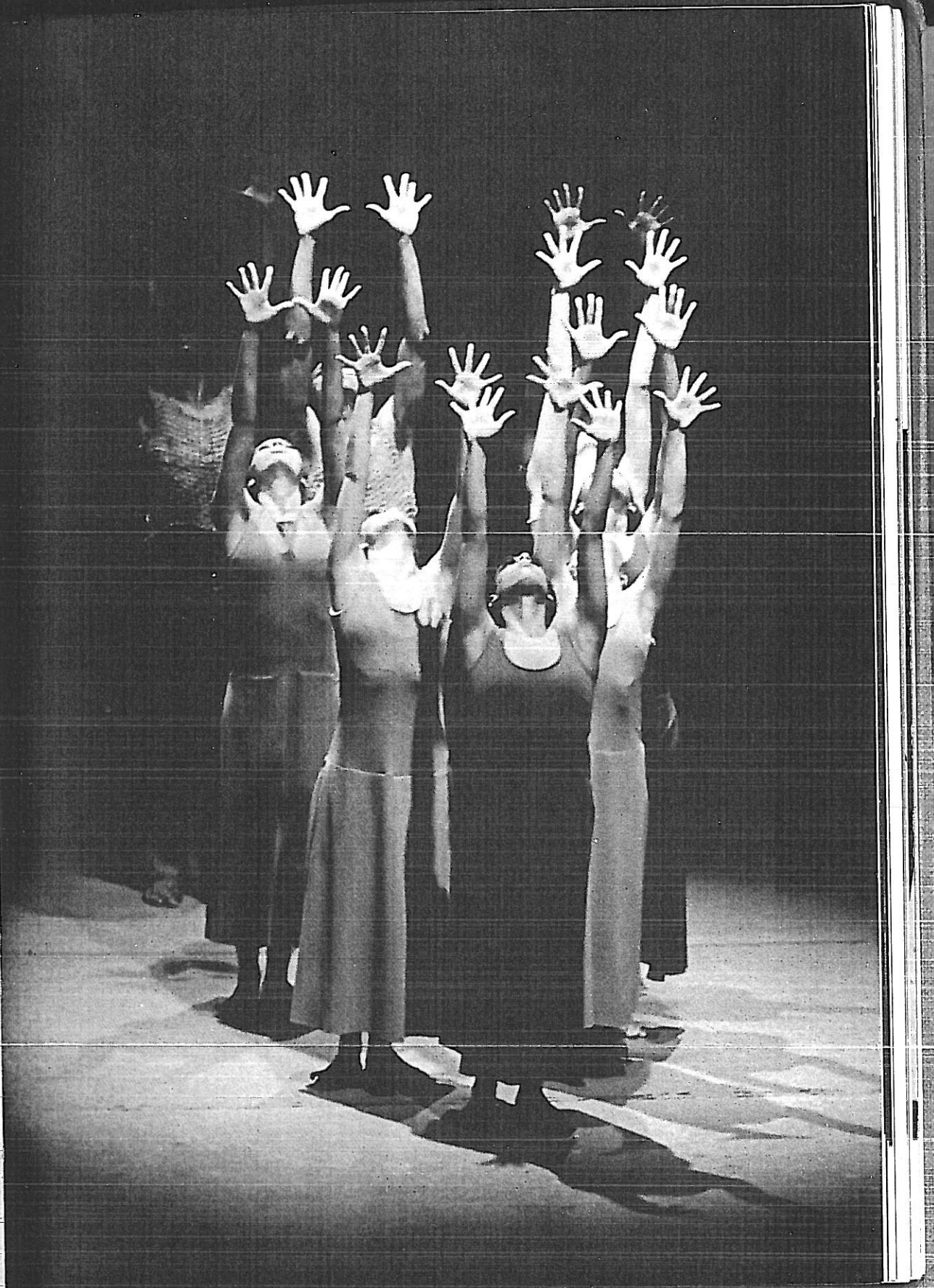
St. Denis' *exotica* was an evocation of the Orient; Ailey's is a tribute to black America. *Revelations* is choreographed to spirituals, and it contains visual references and jokes that are certainly more meaningful to black spectators than to white, but it is never parochial or exclusionist. The "Wading in the Water" section may recall memories to those who, like the choreographer, were raised in the traditions of a black Baptist church, but the beauty of the movement conveys the emotional content of that tradition to anyone who may be watching. The liquid arms and waists of the dancers speak of flowing water, a sense of cleansing and a complex of calming emotions, whether or not the spectator has ever witnessed a lakeside baptism. Ailey's work manages to convey at least some of the experiences of black people—such as the function of the church as an instrument of human and ethnic survival—to white people. His popularity was certainly enhanced by the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, but he was making dances about blackness and beauty before the two were officially linked by a slogan, and he continued to make them after the great passion of the movement subsided.

Revelations and *Blues Suite*, with their theatricality, their rich music, their humor, their tenderness, and even their touches of bitterness are dances that can evoke pride in black spectators without either scaring white ones out of the theater or sending them home thinking "Now aren't they cute and ethnic?" Few works in the modern dance repertory can weld an audience together as solidly as can *Revelations*, and that is not merely a sociological achievement, but a theatrical one. One of Ailey's more important virtues is that he has built a company that provides the answer to one of a dance fan's most nagging questions: "I have a friend who has never seen a dance performance; what would make a good first time?" Ailey does not frighten anyone out of the theater. Novices do not leave a performance believing that dance is too

The corps massed for the first section of Alvin Ailey's Revelations. The dancers' hands will open down and out in short, strong movements. PHOTOGRAPH BY SUSAN COOK.

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refined, too intellectual, too complicated, too boring, too old-fashioned, or too new-fangled for them. Ailey is not babbling choreographic baby-talk either. He is a showman, he works hard to sell his audience on dance, but he does not condescend to the customers. His kinesthetic vocabulary is limited; his style is simple and in some ways, old-fashioned, but he has a genius for giving pleasure. His extended tours, in this country and in others, have helped create a market for modern dance; a six-week tour of the Soviet Union in 1970 ended with the company receiving a twenty-three-minute ovation in Leningrad—and that is a city that takes its dancing seriously!

Ailey intends his company to present new works, to revive and preserve dances made by modern choreographers, and to be a repository of the black tradition in American dance and music. To achieve the third goal, he presents dances made by black choreographers who are his predecessors or his contemporaries as well as his own creations. Donald McKayle's *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder*, Talley Beatty's *Road of the Phoebe Snow*, and sections of *Come and Get the Beauty of it Hot*, Katherine Dunham's *Choros*, Pearl Primus' *Fanga*, and other works by black dance-makers have been shown in the Ailey repertory, giving audiences some idea of the diverse sources and styles of black dance.

Both Dunham and Primus earned advanced degrees in anthropology, and their choreography traces the dancing of American blacks to beginnings in Africa and the West Indies. Dunham danced in and choreographed films, musicals, and revues; Primus devoted herself to a great extent to the study and preservation of original steps and sources, and both were instrumental in bringing to the American theater the driving, swaying, intensely honest dance that is as integral to the lives of its original performers as are the dances of American Indians.

Talley Beatty began his career with Dunham's dance troupe, and developed into a major choreographer in the jazz idiom, which requires different steps, different use of muscles, and a different sense of music than do modern dance styles. Jazz dancing is quick and sharp; it uses small, tense steps and long, pulling stretches; it conveys an almost unbearable sense of urgency at times and a feline sensuality at other moments. Beatty works with a company in Boston and makes dances for troupes outside the United States, but his works, which are as difficult to dance as they are charged with emotional current, are seldom produced in New York, except by Ailey. Donald McKayle studied with Graham, Cunningham, and Karel Shook. He has danced and choreo-

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graphed for his own company and for Broadway shows and, like Ailey, brings together modern technique, theatrical presentation, and black American themes.

More black choreographers are working now, making dances of African, West Indian, and American subjects, using music from the vast territory of the black heritage and, equally important, doing so without catering to stereotype. It was not too long ago that black dancers were expected to restrict themselves to jazz, to tap, or to ethnic styles. Arthur Mitchell, a great alumnus of the New York City Ballet, formed a company to prove that black dancers could do ballet, and to give them a stage on which to do it. Alvin Ailey, in modern dance, has given black dancers the chance to do works in a variety of styles and, at the same time, has demonstrated that dance drawn from the experience of black Americans can mean a great deal to white audiences, and can be performed by white dancers.

His company contained only black dancers for the first six years of its existence, but the great gospel finale of *Revelations* is now performed by an ensemble of Orientals, Negroes, and Caucasians. If black dancers have been freed, at least to some extent, from the cage of tap dancing, show dancing, all-black revue dancing and "Boy, you-guys-sure-got-a-natural-sense-of-rhythm" dancing, a good deal of the credit must go to Ailey. He has been called in to make dances by ballet companies, he has built and maintained a company of his own, and he has brought to the stage the works of other choreographers who might otherwise have been limited to a far smaller audience.

His presentation of Primus' *Fanga* at New York's City Center in 1973 may have been, for many members of the audience, their first exposure to African dance. The piece is a theatrical version of a traditional dance of welcome, and it is glorious in its virtuosity. African dance of this style requires a shimmering flow of waist and hips that makes the dancer seem almost boneless, a technique that is not part of the tradition of Western theatrical dancing. Undoubtedly, a fine West African dancer would be equally impressed at the sight of an American ballerina grasping an ankle with her hand, raising her foot to the level of her ear and hopping across the stage on the toes of her other foot. African dancers do not use that particular trick, any more than American dancers use the perpetually flowing waist and hips. However, the African dancer might decide to learn the trick and incorporate it into his style, while American dancers can enrich their techniques by observing the methods

used elsewhere. Ailey's own dances do not employ a wide range of steps, but he brings to his stage a great number of styles and shows his audiences the immense possibilities of the human body.

He also regards his company as a museum of modern dance. In 1972, he asked Barton Mumaw to stage Shawn's *Kinetic Molpai*, and his repertory has included works by John Butler, José Limón, Anna Sokolow, Paul Sanasardo, and Lucas Hoving. Ailey's company is attempting to be to modern dance what American Ballet Theater and the City Center Joffrey Ballet are to their styles—a showplace for the choreographers, the styles, and the concepts of movement that have come together to augment an art. Ailey demonstrated his sense of history, and his appreciation of the theatrical element in modern dance, by dedicating a New York season to Charles Weidman in 1975. (It was the last tribute Weidman received; he died shortly afterward.) Ailey is not concerned with exploring new techniques or methods of presentation, as Cunningham and Nikolais are. Instead, he is obsessed with history and with theatrical presentation.

Ailey was born in Rogers, Texas, in 1931. When he was eleven, his family moved to Los Angeles where, seven years later, Ailey took his first dance classes with Lester Horton. He enrolled in UCLA, majoring in Romance Languages, intending to teach, but the offer of a scholarship from Horton pulled him back to dance. Horton, born in 1906, developed and taught a style of movement and choreography which uses a long, stretched-out body line, diagonal tensions, and long balances, which make the torso the center of everything that happens in the body. He had no qualms about taking his company to perform in a nightclub, if that was the way to make people look at dance, and some of Ailey's showmanship and desire to reach a wide audience seems to be a heritage from his teacher. Horton's teaching gave the country a number of fine dancers and established a definite style. The male solo "I Want to Be Ready" from *Revelations*, in which the dancer raises and lowers his

The floor technique of Ailey's teacher, Lester Horton, and the choreographer's own trademark, the arabesque, combine in the "Fix Me, Jesus" duet from Revelations.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SUSAN COOK.

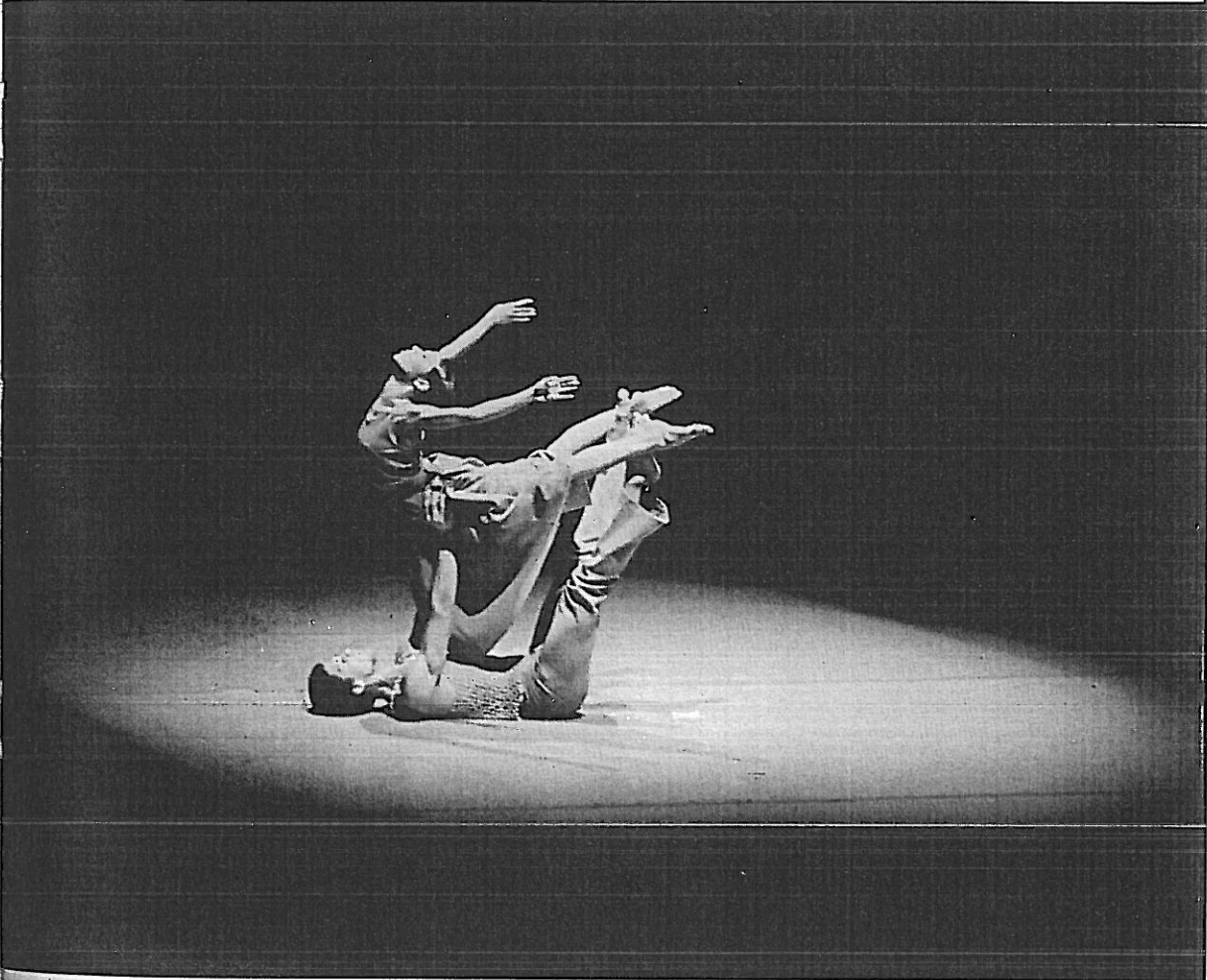
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torso and legs in slow, yearning reaches, resting only his hips on the floor, was developed by Ailey from a Horton floor exercise.

Ailey continued Horton's company for a short while after its founder's death in 1953, then came East in 1958 to dance on Broadway in *House of Flowers* with his partner from the Horton group, Carmen de Lavallade. (De Lavallade's career since then has included a season as first dancer with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet, the position of guest artist during American Ballet Theater's Twenty-fifth Anniversary season at the New York State Theater, and a distinguished assortment of roles in modern dance.) While in New York, Ailey studied at Martha Graham's school, took classes in modern dance with Hanya Holm and Charles Weidman, in ballet with Karel Shook, and in composition with Doris Humphrey. He appeared as dancer and actor, on Broadway and off, while forming his company and building it. He gave his first New York concert in 1957, and formed a company the following year. The American Dance Theater gave its first performance at the Ninety-second Street Y in March, 1958, presenting Ailey's *Blues Suite*.

The work is still in the company's repertory. It is made to the music of Southern black blues, which are sung as well as played. The movements are large, clear and unambiguous in their physical, emotional and musical meanings. The dance is bawdy, funny, and immensely appealing. "The House of the Rising Sun" sequence conveys a feeling of tired despair through the use of sharp contractions, short *jetés* that talk of imprisonment and the impossibility of escape, and clawing reaches at the air above the dancers' heads.

During the years following the company's debut, it made one or two appearances in or around New York each season and a few in other parts of the country. It enjoyed triumphant tours throughout the world, came home, and nearly disbanded for lack of funds. The State Department sent the troupe to the Far East in 1962, to Senegal in 1966, to nine African nations in 1967, and back to Africa and then to the Soviet Union, in

*Judith Jamison stands tall and proud in Cry, Ailey's tribute to
"All black women everywhere—especially our mothers."*

PHOTOGRAPH BY ABDUL-RAHMAN.

1970. (Ailey stopped dancing in 1965, believing that a dancing choreographer is overly tempted to compete with the other performers in his company. However, he continued to teach at Clark Center in New York, which was, for a time, the home of his eleven-member company.)

The tours continued, bookings in the United States began to come more easily, and in 1969 the company was invited to take up residence at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. A year later, Ailey again decided he might have to disband the company because there was not enough money to keep it going. Grants and funds became available, the company continued to grow, and in August 1972, the troupe joined New York's City Center of Music and Drama, of which the New York City Ballet and the City Center Joffrey Ballet also are components. In the same year Ailey choreographed Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*, and made the final segments of *The River*, a work to a score by Duke Ellington he had started the previous year, for American Ballet Theater.

Ailey was now part of the dance establishment. He founded a school, he gave regular seasons in New York, he took his company on tour; he was able to devote more effort to his goals of making his company a museum of modern dance and a center for black dance. His own choreographic style solidified into an energetic, muscular way of dancing that rejoiced in strength and exuberance, both of which are sometimes overemphasized. He is fond of arabesques and of a long, reaching line and fluttering movements of the hands and arms. He works well with masses of dancers, neatly spaced and moving in unison, and with diagonal lines. Two pieces choreographed in 1971, *Cry* and *Choral Dances*, show both the range and the limitations of his work.

Cry is a solo, made for the magnificent Judith Jamison and dedicated "for all black women everywhere—especially our mothers." Three recordings are used as the music: Alice Coltrane's "Something About John Coltrane," Laura Nyro's "Been on a Train," and The Voices of East Harlem's "Right on, Be Free"—jazz, contemporary blues, and soul music respectively. The dancer is driven from pride to degradation, and pulls

Ailey's love for theatricality enlivens the poses, settings, and costumes of The Mooche, a tribute to Duke Ellington and to four famous black entertainers. PHOTOGRAPH BY SUSAN COOK.

herself back again. She unwinds the headcloth she wears as part of a proud costume and uses it as a rag with which to scrub floors. Her hands reach high and flutter down like birds; she contracts in anguish, swings her torso wildly from the waist, stretches in arabesque. She sinks to the ground, rises, writhes, bends double, pulls erect, and finally moves toward the wings in short, rhythmic, ecstatic steps as the curtain falls.

The dance is a virtuoso piece because it uses jazz movement, steps derived from African dance, Graham technique, Horton technique, and almost classical arabesques. It is exhausting to perform. Despite the number of sources, the actual vocabulary of steps used is not particularly large, and the phrasing not unusually conceived. The work succeeds because it is a showpiece for a brilliant dancer, because it suits its music, and because it is intensely, richly emotional.

Choral Dances is made to Benjamin Britten's "Choral Dances" from the opera *Gloriana*, and portrays a community celebrating a series of rituals and processions reminiscent in their solemnity of an Anglican church service. The movements often are long and stretchy; there is a lovely passage involving a long, diagonal line of dancers and a fine, clear series of groupings. Again, the vocabulary of movement is not large, but a mood is established clearly, and the music is well served.

Ailey is not a kinesthetically imaginative choreographer; he is a theatrically imaginative one. *Revelations*, *Choral Dances*, and *Cry* make their statements with steps and patterns closely related to the music and the mood it sets, and by heightening that mood through the use of costumes, lighting, and kinesthetic energy. Other Ailey works rely on narrative, on the emotional power of a specific situation or on costumes, setting, and special effects. As a rule, these works are less interesting and effective than those which are direct reflections of music by movement, which is then augmented by theatrical devices.

Ailey does not allow his enthusiasm to be diminished by the difficulty of a project he has set himself to accomplish. In 1975, he definitely determined to build a monument in movement to Duke Ellington, a plan he had considered for some time, and to present an Ellington Celebration during the summer of the nation's bicentennial year.

Paul Taylor.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JACK MITCHELL.

The choreographer began working with the composer in 1963, and got to know him better when they worked together on *The River*. Ailey was impressed by Ellington's elegance and vitality, as well as by his enormous talent. He recalls that they stayed in the same hotel in Canada while working on *The River*, and that Ellington would pound on his door at four in the morning, full of energy and calling, "Alvin, are you ready to work?"

In 1975, Ailey choreographed *The Mooche*, a celebration of four great black, female performers, to an Ellington score, and in May 1976, he offered the premiere of *Black, Brown and Beige*. *The Mooche*, which was first devised for television and then revised for the stage, makes more of its effect with theatrical devices—costumes and settings—than with choreography. The effects are fun to watch and the love which Ailey devoted to the piece is obvious, but the steps lack vitality. *Black, Brown and Beige* is somewhat more successful; it employs most of Ailey's favorite techniques—arabesques, diagonal lines and semicircles, short steps combined with large movements of the arms, backward arches of the torso, long, yearning reaches. Like much of Ailey's work, the dance lacks variety and focus, but it serves the music well.

Ailey is definitely not a member of the avant garde. In some ways, he has gone back to the simple, direct style of Denishawn. His dance celebrates athleticism, his presentations celebrate theatricality, his theater celebrates excitement. He has brought black audiences into the theater and shown white audiences something of the tradition of black dance. He has made his stage a place where various styles of dance can be presented in proximity to one another, and he has brought about a fusion of balletic, jazz, and modern techniques. His faults and his virtues are those of American show business. He can slip into banality, even into crassness on one evening, and rise to excitement, to a keen sense of theatrical presentation, and to emotional power the next. He has made life a little easier for black dancers and choreographers, and he has sent a lot of people away from the theater happy and willing to come back again.

In 1957, *Dance Observer* ran a review of a concert by Paul Taylor which consisted of an oblong of blank space: During one of the dances on the program, Taylor had stood without moving from the time the curtain rose until it fell. In 1962, the same choreographer produced *Aureole*, a dance to music by Handel that was taken, seven years later, into the repertory of the Royal Danish Ballet. Nine years after *Aureole*, Taylor presented *Big Bertha*, a devastating bit of social commentary in narrative form.