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MERRILL SINGER (2005)

## AILEY, ALVIN

JANUARY 5, 1931

DECEMBER 1, 1989

Born in Rogers, Texas, the only child of working-class parents who separated when he was two, dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey moved to Los Angeles with his mother in 1942. Shy from his itinerant Texas life, Ailey reluctantly turned to dance when a high-school classmate introduced him to Lester Horton's Hollywood studio in 1949. He poured himself into study and developed a weighty, smoldering performance style that suited his athletic body. Ailey moved to New York in 1954 to dance with partner Carmen DeLavallade in the Broadway production of *House of Flowers*. Performing success and study with leading modern dance and ballet teachers Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and Karel Shook led Ailey to found his own dance theater company in 1958. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) began as a repertory company of seven dancers devoted to both modern dance classics and new works created by Ailey and

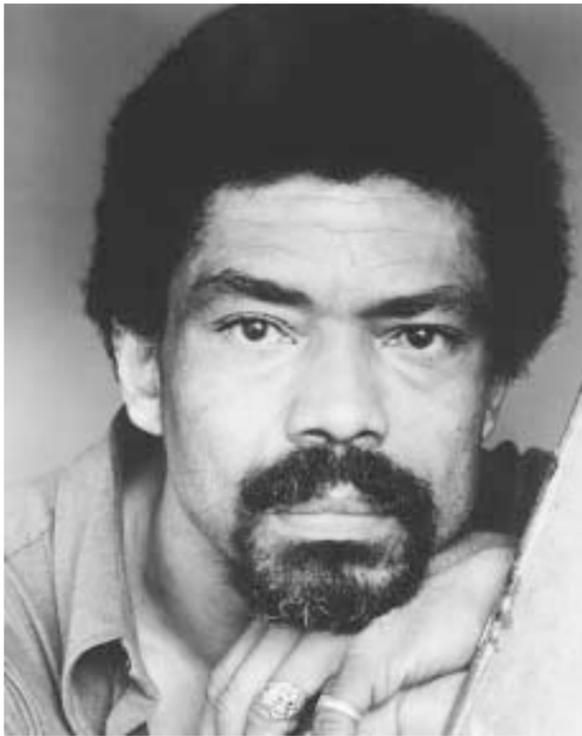
other young artists. The critically successful first concerts in 1958 and 1960 marked the beginning of a new era of dance performance devoted to African-American themes. *Blues Suite* (1958), set in and around a barrelhouse, depicts the desperation and joys of life on the edge of poverty in the South. Highly theatrical and immediately accessible, the dance contains sections of early twentieth-century social dances, Horton dance technique, Jack Cole-inspired jazz dance, and ballet partnering. Early performances of *Revelations* (1960) established Ailey's company as the foremost dance interpreter of African-American experience. The dance quickly became the company's signature ballet, eclipsing previous concert attempts at dancing to sacred black music. Set to a series of spirituals and gospel selections arranged by Brother John Sellers, *Revelations* depicts a spectrum of black religious worship, including richly sculpted group prayer ("I've Been Boked"), a ceremony of ritual baptism ("Wade in the Water"), a moment of introverted, private communion ("I Wanna Be Ready"), a duet of trust and support for a minister and devotee ("Fix Me, Jesus"), and a final, celebratory gospel exclamation, "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham."

Several Ailey dances established precedents for American dance. *Feast of Ashes* (1962), created for the Harkness Ballet, is acknowledged as the first successful pointe ballet choreographed by a modern dancer. In 1966 Ailey contributed dances for the New York Metropolitan Opera's inaugural production at Lincoln Center, Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra*. In 1970 he created *The River* for the American Ballet Theatre. Set to an original score commissioned from Duke Ellington, this ballet convincingly fused theatrical jazz dancing and ballet technique. In 1971 Ailey created the staging for Leonard Bernstein's rock-influenced *Mass*, which opened the newly built Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Major distinctions and honors followed Ailey throughout his choreographic career, which spanned the creation of more than fifty dances for his own company, the American Ballet Theater, the Joffrey Ballet, the Paris Opera Ballet, the London Festival Ballet, and the Royal Danish Ballet. Among his many awards were honorary doctorates in fine arts from Princeton University, Bard College, Adelphi University, and Cedar Crest College; a United Nations Peace Medal, and an NAACP Spingarn Medal, in 1976. In 1988 he was celebrated by the president of the United States for a lifetime of achievement in the arts at the Kennedy Center Honors.

### COMPANY AND REPERTORY

In its earliest years the AAADT spent much time on the road, touring and bringing dance to a large audience of



**Alvin Ailey (1931–1989).** A pioneer in modern dance, Ailey founded the racially integrated and popular modern dance troupe, the Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre. © BETTMANN/CORBIS. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.

people who had never heard of concert performance. This largely African-American audience provided the well-spring of support essential to the Ailey enterprise. The AAADT established its vast international reputation through a series of tours begun in 1962 by a five-month engagement in Southeast Asia and Australia. Sponsored by the International Exchange Program under the Kennedy administration, this tour established a pattern of performance in foreign countries that continued with a trip to Rio de Janeiro (1963); a European tour including London, Hamburg, and Paris (1964); an engagement at the World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal (1966); a sixteen-week European tour, including the Holland Festival in Amsterdam (1967); a visit to Israel (August 1967); a U.S. State Department-sponsored nine-nation tour of Africa (1967); and a performance at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland (1968). In 1970 the AAADT became the first American modern dance company to perform in the post-war Soviet Union. The company retained peerless stature as a touring ambassador of goodwill beginning in the 1970s; high points included a prize-winning performance at the International Dance Festival in Paris (1970); a second Far East tour (1977); a Brazil tour (1978); and several

command performances for heads of state and royalty. By 2004 the AAADT had been seen by some nineteen million people worldwide.

Active in the pursuit of dance history, the varied repertory of the AAADT has, in the words of Ailey in an American Broadcast Company television program, *Americans All*, sustained an “impulse to preserve modern dance to know where it’s been in order to know where it’s going, and to encourage the participation of the audience” in that process (1974). The eclectic repertory was provided by choreographers working in a variety of dance modes, including ballet, jazz dance, Graham modern, Horton, and Dunham technique. Important pieces danced by the company included Donald McKayle’s *Rainbow ‘Round My Shoulder* (1959), Talley Beatty’s *The Road of the Phoebe Snow* (1959), Anna Sokolow’s *Rooms* (1965), Louis Johnson’s *Lament* (1965), Geoffrey Holder’s *Prodigal Prince* (1967), Ulysses Dove’s *Vespers* (1986), Judith Jamison’s *Forgotten Time* (1989), Donald Byrd’s *Dance at the Gym* (1991), Jawolle Willa Jo Zollar’s *Shelter* (1992), Ronald K. Brown’s *Grace* (1999), and Alonzo King’s *Following the Subtle Current Upstream* (2000), as well as dances by venerable American choreographers Ted Shawn, Pearl Primus, Katherine Dunham, Joyce Trisler, and Lester Horton. In 1976 the AAADT celebrated composer Duke Ellington with a festival featuring fifteen new ballets set to his music, a project that highlighted Ellington’s musical achievement.

#### COMPANY MEMBERS

Ailey encouraged his dancers to present individualized and highly emotional performances, a strategy that created the first series of star personalities in American modern dance. Judith Jamison’s electrifying performance of *Cry* presented a coherent relationship between the dancing body and the experience of living as a black woman in America. Created in 1971 as a birthday present for Ailey’s mother, Lula Cooper, *Cry* has been successfully assumed by several dancers, most notably Donna Wood, Renee Robinson, Sara Yarborough, and Nasha Thomas. In 1972 Ailey created the elegiac solo *Love Songs* for dancer Dudley Williams, revived in 1993 by dancer Michael Joy. Dancer Gary DeLoatch, a longtime principal with the company, brought an eloquent intensity to his roles, especially as the pusher in Talley Beatty’s *The Stack-Up* (1983) and as Charlie Parker in Ailey’s *For “Bird”—With Love* (1984). Innumerable significant dance personalities have passed through the AAADT, including Marilyn Banks, Hope Clarke, Carmen DeLavallade, George Faison, Miguel Godreau, Dana Hash, Linda Kent, Dwight Rhoden, Desmond Richardson, Kelvin Rotardier, Elizabeth Roxas, Matthew

Rushing, Clive Thompson, James Truitte, Andre Tyson, and Sylvia Waters.

#### SCHOOL AND OUTREACH

In 1969 Ailey founded the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center to educate dance students in the history and art of ballet and modern dance. Courses were offered in dance technique and history, music for dancers, dance composition, and theatrical design. In 1974 the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble, a professional performance ensemble, was formed under the direction of Sylvia Waters as a bridge between study and membership in professional dance companies. In 1984 the Alvin Ailey Student Performance Group was created under the direction of Kelvin Rotardier. The Student Performance Group offered lecture-demonstrations to communities traditionally underserved by the arts. In 1989 Dance Foundation Inc., the umbrella organizations for the AAADT and the Ailey School, initiated the Ailey Camps program, an outreach program designed to “enhance the self-esteem, creative expression, and critical thinking skills of inner-city youth through dance,” according to a Dance Theater Foundation press release in 1989. Success of the initial venture in Kansas City, Missouri, led to similar programs begun in New York City (1990) and Baltimore, Maryland (1992).

Ailey created the AAADT to feature the talents of his African-American colleagues, although the company was never exclusively black. Ailey integrated his company to counter the “reverse chauvinism in being an all-black anything.” He told the *New York Times*, “I am trying to show the world that we are all human beings and that color is not important. What is important is the quality of our work (1988).” In the last interview conducted before his death, he commented that the essence of the Ailey enterprise was that “the dancers be fed, kept alive, interested” in the work. “We’re trying to create a whole spectrum of experience for the dancer as well as the audience,” he said, dramatically understating the realities of his achievements.

Ailey stopped dancing in 1965 and slowed his choreographic assignments in the 1970s to attend to the administrative and fund-raising operations associated with his ever expanding company. Upon Ailey’s death, Judith Jamison was appointed artistic director of the company, to work closely with rehearsal director and longtime company member Masazumi Chaya. The AAADT finally emerged from financial difficulties in 1992, when *Dance Magazine* proclaimed it “recession-proof” because of powerful development efforts on the part of the Dance Foundation Inc.’s board of directors. Jamison has led the troupe to great fiscal and artistic strength, with her own choreography featured in the newest repertory. In 2005, the Alvin

Ailey Dance Center opened in Manhattan as the nation’s largest facility devoted to dance.

Although Ailey gave numerous interviews throughout his career, he was decidedly private about his personal life. He described himself as “a bachelor and a loner” to writer John Gruen (1972) and hardly ever allowed outsiders into his most private thoughts. In 1980 Ailey was briefly hospitalized for stress-related conditions. His death followed a long, solitary struggle that had taken him out of the limelight for some time. Ailey’s legacy to the dance world was to foster a freedom of choice—from ballet, modern, and social dance performance—to best express humanity in movement terms suited to the theatrical moment.

**See also** Ballet; Dove, Ulysses; Dunham, Katherine; Ellington, Edward Kennedy “Duke”; Holder, Geoffrey; Jamison, Judith; Parker, Charlie; Spingarn Medal; Spirituals

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THOMAS F. DEFRANTZ (1996)  
Updated by author 2005

## AL-AMIN, JAMIL ABDULLAH

OCTOBER 4, 1943

Writer and activist Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, formerly known as H. Rap Brown, was born Hubert Gerold Brown