

Alvin Ailey – American Choreographers



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Alvin Ailey was one of the leading choreographers of his era. His work helped forge a union between ballet, modern, and jazz dance, and was often inflected with the rhythm and feel of blues, gospel, and other aspects of African-American experience.

Ailey was born on January 5, 1931, in poor and rural southeast Texas, where he was comforted and stimulated by the traditions of the black church and the more raucous life of the community roadhouse. The experience would serve as his muse in later life as he sought to present the beauty and complexity of black culture to a wide audience.

In 1942, Ailey moved with his mother to Los Angeles, where at age 14 he saw Katherine Dunham's Tropical Revue - a colorful and lush dance extravaganza. He returned to see her troupe perform again and again, and eventually enrolled in the dance school of Lester Horton. When Horton died in 1953, Ailey briefly took over choreographing for his company. A year later he accepted an offer to dance on Broadway in the Truman Capote/Harold Arlen musical House of Flowers. After that show closed, Ailey studied ballet, modern dance, and acting with acclaimed artists and teachers including Martha Graham and Stella Adler.

In 1958, Ailey founded his own company and had a major success with Blues Suite, a look at the earthy entertainment to be found at the community roadhouse in small towns in the South. Revelations (1960), considered Ailey's masterwork, was an even greater success. Though it incorporates autobiographical elements, Revelations has been described as an encapsulation of the history of blacks in America. Set to the music of spirituals, it celebrates the promise of deliverance from earthly trouble.

Originally an all-black company that provided a place for talented dancers to perform when mainstream companies were resistant to hiring them, Ailey's troupe integrated in the early 1960s. In 1965, Ailey began devoting all of his energy to choreography and managing his company. Under his direction, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performed 150 works by some 50 choreographers. Ailey's

choreography incorporated jazz elements, modern dance, classical ballet, and African and Caribbean movement styles - cross-idioms that made tremendous demands on his dancers - and helped popularize dance in America. Through the years, he choreographed for other companies as well, earning repeated honors. He died on December 1, 1989, in New York City.

Source: Encyclopedia Africana