

ESSENCE

How Attending Alvin Ailey's Opening Night Gala Reminded Me About The Beauty Of Black People

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Our editor attended Ailey's Opening Night Gala in NYC and This is a personal account about her experience.

The night of the Alvin Ailey Opening Night Gala was not only a beautiful piece of nostalgia following their return to the stage after two years, but a reminder that COVID had completely ripped me from my sense of personal style. Though the invitation clearly read "gala," I found myself consistently second, third, and fourth guessing my choices of outfits, fragrance, lip color, and shoes. Anyone who knows me personally can attest to the fact that casualwear is my best friend – mom jeans, an oversized tee and some kicks are typically my way to go. But don't let the clean Air Forces fool you; I can put a piece together in a hot second.

For some odd reason, I found myself completely unaligned with the idea of what fashion and style mean to me. Why do I own this? Would this even look good on me? What was I thinking when I checked out with this in my cart? These were the thoughts swirling around in my head so furiously that imposter syndrome began to show up and I even considered not attending because I didn't think my wardrobe was upscale enough. Should I go? Should I make up an excuse? What if the lighting in my house throws off my makeup and my contour looks horrible once I get to the venue?

I don't know who needs to hear this, but as comfortable as your comfort zone is, challenge yourself to inch closer and closer towards the edge every day until you're ready to take that leap. Yes, that means in fashion, too. After rummaging through my closet for about an hour, I decided on this black jumpsuit with a deep V. Basic, but effective. I hadn't worn this jumpsuit since my cousin's birthday dinner in 2018 when I was a size 5. I am now a size 8. Don't get it twisted, I am very much on this self-love journey of acceptance and loving my body for everything that it is and isn't, including the realism of pandemic weight gain thanks to wine, ordering food, and unaccounted for laziness. After I jumped up and down, sucked in a few times, and zipped up the back of the ensemble with my coat hanger, part one was finished.

I took a look at myself in the mirror and began to criticize and self-sabotage. This is a gala, not Studio 54. If you don't have anything nicer to wear, don't go at all. Damn, girl, why keep these clothes if you know you can't fit them anymore? My negative voices began to scream louder and louder, but I would not let this get in the way of the night I'd been looking forward to forever. I decided to take a page out of Chloë Bailey's book and just not give a damn. Yes, while I may have been underdressed due to the lack of variety in my wardrobe, I was going to walk in with the confidence of the finest underdressed millennial in the place. I pulled my faux locs to one side for a cascading effect, threw on a new ear cuff of mine with an old Express necklace I had from high school, and some minimalist black heels from Aldo to tie the look together. I was nowhere near gala ready, but I was perfect for me.

If there was any night for Black folks to show up and show out on a Wednesday night in the city, it would absolutely be Ailey's gala. While I may have missed the mark, walking into the City Center was what I needed to see that though I may have been dressed for a different occasion, my fellow brothers and sisters understood the assignment. When I found my B5 seat in the orchestra, the audience had already been around 85% filled with patrons of all ages, races, genders, and more. One thing everyone had in common was they all looked absolutely stunning.



As I made my way to my front row assigned seat, I began to take off my jacket with hesitancy and turned my back to the audience to avoid the self-imposed judgment that I've created in my head. I was scared, I'll admit, to take off the jacket to reveal my bareback because I knew that my Free 99 closet shopping was no match for the elegance in the room. But, as more people came through the doors, I took notice that everyone was on their own timing – and I loved it. One woman came in with combat boots and a satin yellow dress, while another one wore a long denim dress with a face beat to the gods. Some wore luxurious gowns that reminded me of Disney princesses, and others wore kitten heels with cocktail dresses. Everyone was on their own timing – I was officially beginning to love it here.

“Is it better to look good or to feel good? I say it’s better to feel good about how you look,” said Robert Battle, Artistic Director of Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre, during his opening speech. Right then and there, though the speech was totally unrelated to my negative self-talk, that was the validation I needed.



There was no surprise that the performance was tear-jerking and emotion-evoking, especially Revelations. “Fix Me, Jesus” and “I Wanna Be Ready” always get me every time, but it was time to grab my coat and trudge across the street to the next location. I made my way to my assigned table – number 1 – and found myself at the front left-hand corner of the Ziegfeld Ballroom. The night was young at the age of 9:00 pm and the ballroom was filled with nothing less than beautiful spirits and energy. Again, hesitant to take off my coat, I decided to check it because there would be no point in hauling around a heavy peacoat indoors in case I wanted to dance or mingle. With my back showing and my V neck deep enough to reach the top of my used-to-be abs, I slowly began to feel more confident. Not because I was getting compliments or anything of that nature, but it was because I realized no one cared. Everyone was there in celebration of Alvin Ailey’s legacy and being able to speak the love language of physical touch once again after a long 20 months of ZOOM and only getting dressed from the waist up. The love that I felt in the room was heavy and served as a true testament to the beauty of Black people and throughout the night, I felt reunited with old and new faces in dance, culture, and love.

While at the gala, I connected with Pose actor and dancer Ryan Jamaal Swain, who shared with me his thoughts on the impact of the night. Though this was my first time ever attending, his kind words truly made me feel like I was in the right place with the right people. “Simply, I love us. We really do know how to turn pain into beauty. When I say that, I mean that we have all [gone] through our bouts of grief, anxiety, and mourning this year – all of us. But it is in our spirit as black people, in the spirit of fictive kinship, to show up as our full selves in spite of. We really are some of the most beautiful and resilient people and I am so happy I am a part of this community,” Swain shared passionately about his thoughts on the Ailey gala. As a dancer himself and proud Ailey alumna, Swain praises the “legacy of excellence, service, and a true flagship for the Dance Diaspora” throughout the years of the company’s existence as demonstrated through the magical night.

“With the caveat of staying at home and being connected to myself more, I have found that my style has really become about what I want to say versus who I am trying to please,” Swain continued to explain about the turnaround of his personal style since the start of the pandemic. “Style is the sentence that introduces you before you open your mouth to speak and I have learned so much about self-love, authenticity, power, and shape whilst I’ve been in the house deepening my understanding of myself and the world around me that I believe now my style has matured. Understanding that I can say a multitude of things in very nuanced and specific ways. That’s me: sophisticated, fun, and powerful.”

I also had the pleasure of sharing a table with Emmy award-winning host from The View, Sunny Hostin, who had a candid conversation with me about her new approach to style post-pandemic and how she puts comfort first. Hostin described her style as “much more elevated comfort” as opposed to her usual glam while the whole kit and caboodle. “If I have to tie my shoes I don’t want to wear them. Slides are my new heels,” she told me jokingly yet seriously. Following my gala experience, I connected with Rehearsal Director Ronni Favors about the significance of the night at hand. Since moving up from her role as a ballet instructor at the 1989 inaugural session of AileyCamp in Kansas City and Artistic Director of the Camp in 1990, Favors has truly seen the evolution of Ailey II and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Though she wasn’t able to attend the night herself because she wanted to be cautious of the number of attendees, Favors still gave flowers to Ailey’s growth throughout the years and its ability to stand tall amidst the pandemic in celebration and fellowship.



“It’s about celebrating the African American cultural experience and making that part of the cultural conversation of our country and of the world. The gala is a sparkly kickoff to that mission, that restatement of our mission every year,” she told me over the phone. “It’s all about really bringing a mix of people together. That was kind of how Alvin [Ailey] lived his life – always interested in people no matter who you were, where you were from, or how much money you made. If you made a lot, if you made a little, it didn’t matter, but just who are you as a person, and what can be celebrated about you, your life?”

Throughout the night, as I danced in the center of the floor – and started the Electric Slide, might I add – I realized that this night wasn’t about myself, my body insecurities, or my outfit. It was about a vibe that couldn’t be recreated or duplicated by any other group of people aside from who I was with. The wine was flowing, the band was raging and singing, and a time was had. Thank you Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre for reminding me about the importance of being reunited in dance, style, and fellowship in times of fear and uncertainty.