

# DanceTeacher

## Renee Robinson Is on a Mission to Get Dancers Excited About Dance History

By: Haley Hilton  
February 28, 2023



For the up-and-coming generation, dance history doesn't always sound like the most exciting course. But for students at The Ailey School, former Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater dancer Renee Robinson is bringing enthusiasm to the class by helping her students make personal connections to the past.

Robinson's training began with classical ballet at 9 years old at The Jones and Hayward School of Ballet in Washington, DC. The school formed a small, regional ballet company called The Capital Ballet Company, where Robinson performed during her teenage years before graduating high school and moving to New York City. Once in Manhattan, she auditioned for The Ailey School and was accepted on scholarship. Next, she was invited to join the Ailey Student Performance Group

established and directed by former principal Kelvin Rotardier, then Ailey II (called The Alvin Ailey Rep Ensemble at the time), and finally the main company. She danced with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for 30 years—the longest of any female in the company's history. "I was selected by Alvin Ailey, danced primarily under the direction of Judith Jamison, and spent my last few years in the company under the direction of Robert Battle," Robinson says.

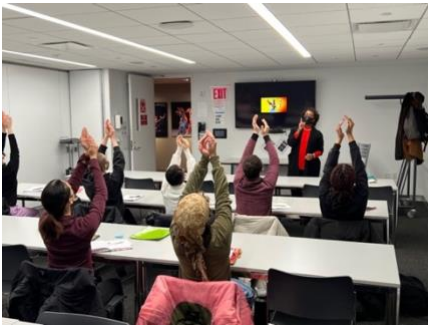
As an educator, Robinson's career began during her time as a professional dancer. "As the company traveled the world, I was able to participate in outreach by teaching master classes and conducting workshops in the various locations we performed in," she says. Since then, she has taught around the world and at schools including Juilliard, Yale University and The Ailey School, where she currently teaches second-year students in the Ailey Certificate Program.

Each semester, Robinson seeks to generate excitement around dance history by helping her students connect to dancers' stories and works on a personal level. "I tell them that by being in this program, they are already part of the Alvin Ailey legacy," Robinson says. "Their name is on the roster, and they are part of history. Once they understand that, a light bulb goes off, and they are more invested in learning about this world they are now a part of." The first assignment of the class is to read biographies on Alvin Ailey, Judith Jamison and Robert Battle. Then, she asks them to write a summary about two things they found in those readings that connected to them personally. Next, she has her students study Ailey's *Revelations*, the signature work of AAADT. "As second-years in the program, these students are likely starting to learn excerpts from the ballet," she says. "My hope is that because they are physically embodying the movement in their rehearsal process, they will feel a deeper connection as they learn about the work's history." Next, Robinson has her students zoom out from Mr. Ailey's works and research ballets set on the company by outside choreographers. And, finally, they expand their study to works found outside of AAADT altogether.

In honor of Black History Month, *Dance Teacher* asked Robinson if there were any specific areas of dance history that she particularly liked to focus on. "I teach this course at a world-famous school that bears the name of an African American man who lived during a specific time in American history," Robinson says. "I try to make sure my students understand the significance his unique experience had on his works—in particular, *Revelations*." That said, Robinson wants her students (and our readers) to know that [Mr. Ailey's influence](#) extends beyond American history and that his voice and works have a global impact. "When *Revelations* left the shores of America, even people who weren't African American connected with it," she says. "The celebration of the African American experience, particularly during the month of February, is in the school's legacy. So even if a dancer isn't African American, or even American, they can still find who they are in this big, generous gift Mr. Ailey has left to modern dance and humanity."



Here, Robinson shares her favorite teaching tools, how she warms up for her physical classes, the teaching prop that makes all the difference and the items she never leaves home without.



Her go-to teaching warm-up “My favorite way to warm up is Zumba. You get cardio and movement, and there is no stress about picking up a combo.”

Her favorite teaching attire “I wear red Nike sneakers with a flexible sole. They are old, so I don’t think they make them anymore, but they are fabulous. In terms of clothes, I love anything that is flowy!”

Teaching props “I use pieces of elastic from the fabric store that are very thin. You place one under your foot and the student pulls on it until they feel the tension. Then, they match that tension with their bodies. This helps them understand the use of opposition

in the body. I explain to them that energy going out of your body in opposite directions can help you balance and connect with the music.”

How she likes to start each day “When I wake up in the morning, I like to have two big glasses of warm water. It’s very friendly to my stomach, and it makes me feel calm and happy.”

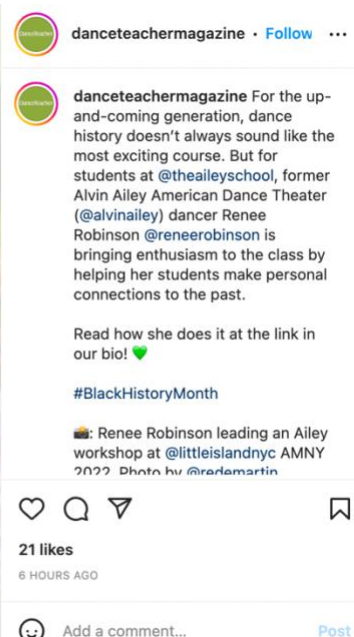
The food she can’t live without “Leafy greens. There is a very specific type of fiber that leafy greens have. When I was dancing, I met someone who told me leafy greens would keep my skin beautiful, and she was right.”

Her favorite nondance activities “I love going to the theater. I love all of the wonderful free public arts performances in NYC. I love going to the galleries. I love libraries. I love the specific architecture found from city to city or bureau to bureau. I love drawing, traveling and learning about other cultures and exploring different countries. I love to cook.”

Her ideal day off “Walking through Central Park and having a good meal. Stopping to get hot chocolate, and going to the theater.”

Items she never leaves home without “My backpack, my computer and iPad, a small notebook to jot things down, a bottle of water, a headset, my phone, an extra mask and plastic gloves.”

Her guilty pleasure “Macaroni and cheese!”



View the Dance Teacher Instagram post [here](#).