

# ESSENCE

## Alvin Ailey's Hope Boykin On The Journey To Becoming Comfortable In Her Own Skin

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If you’ve ever seen Hope Boykin dance onstage, you’ve witnessed modern dance at its finest.

For 17 years, the North Carolina native has been giving us the ‘theatrical experience’ that has made the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater one of the most celebrated dance companies in the world. As the eldest company member, Hope is a throwback to Alvin Ailey’s early days, when pioneers like renowned dancer and Artistic Director Emerita Judith Jamison, a woman she greatly admires and considers a mentor, told stories from their toes to their fingertips.

Yet she’s completely relevant today. With her beautiful dark skin, powerhouse body, and baldhead, Hope is giving us the unapologetic blackness that we crave. We recently caught up with her as she prepares for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater National Tour, where she will be dancing in some of Ailey’s most popular pieces, as well as debuting the ballet she choreographed, ‘r-Evolution, Dream.’ Here Hope shares with us what it means to be comfortable in her own skin.

### **Have you always felt comfortable in your skin?**

No. Growing up in the South I felt like it was a punishment to be dark skinned. I’d hear references to being so dark and unattractive. There was always the feeling that I wasn’t enough. It took time for me to appreciate me for me.

### **When did things begin to change?**

Once I got to Howard University and I was surrounded by people who were comfortable in their skin, these black people seemed more accepting, more diverse. There were so many different types of people from so many places and everyone was so beautiful; it didn’t matter what complexion you were. It trickled into what I was learning about myself, and one day I looked in the mirror and I liked the shape of my eyes, my nose, and my lips fit my face. I wasn’t cured, but I was starting to like the way I was put together.

### **How did you step into what’s become your look?**

It was September of 93 and I moved to New York to study at the Ailey school. I couldn’t afford to keep my hair looking what I considered decent- at the time it was relaxed, I was dancing all day, and it was impossible - so after trying unsuccessfully to maintain it myself, I realized that it would be better to just cut it all off. It turned out to be the best thing I could have done because it was like seeing myself for the first time; I didn’t even know my ears squared off at the top. I could only evaluate my face based on my features and I liked them.

### **Did you ever wonder what shaving your head might do to your dance career?**

No because Judith Jamison had short hair. When you have admired someone like that it makes it easier. If there is ever a role that calls for something else, because maybe my look doesn’t fit the period, just like putting on a costume, I will wear a wig. It’s all a part of the character, it doesn’t change who I am.

### **What’s the best advice you’ve gotten?**

I was brought up in a really good time and introduced to dance while a lot of pioneers were still living, so I got a chance to understand their approach and be guided in a special way. The interesting thing about then and now is they didn’t hesitate to tell you the truth. If they thought that something didn’t work it didn’t mean that you

didn't work. Today we don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. We're in a softer society, but not really. It's kind of contradictory because we are not afraid to post and share on social media but we are afraid to be honest with one another. The people who really encouraged me, from my mother to Judith Jamison, weren't afraid to tell me the truth.

**Who do you look up to beauty-wise?**

Hmmm...this may sound strange, but I love Miami. I love seeing these mothers on the beach with their children being free and just enjoying themselves. Seeing how proud and secure and confident they are in their bodies is so revealing and I appreciate that.

**What's your beauty advice to others?**

I'm 5'2, so on a day when I find myself wishing that I had longer legs and arms so I can get greater extension, or I'm wishing that I had what someone else has, I remind myself that I'm wonderfully made. God gave me the right amount of everything, and that's what I try to teach others. I want people to look in the mirror and know that what they have is the right percentage. We can strive to do the things that make us stronger, healthier and give us longevity, but in the end it's all about accepting ourselves.

To learn more about Hope Boykin visit [HopeBoykinDance.com](http://HopeBoykinDance.com) or visit [AlvinAiley.org](http://AlvinAiley.org) for info on Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's North American tour from February through May 2017, featuring premieres like r-Evolution, Dream and classics like Revelations.