

whydance

by Rachael McLaren

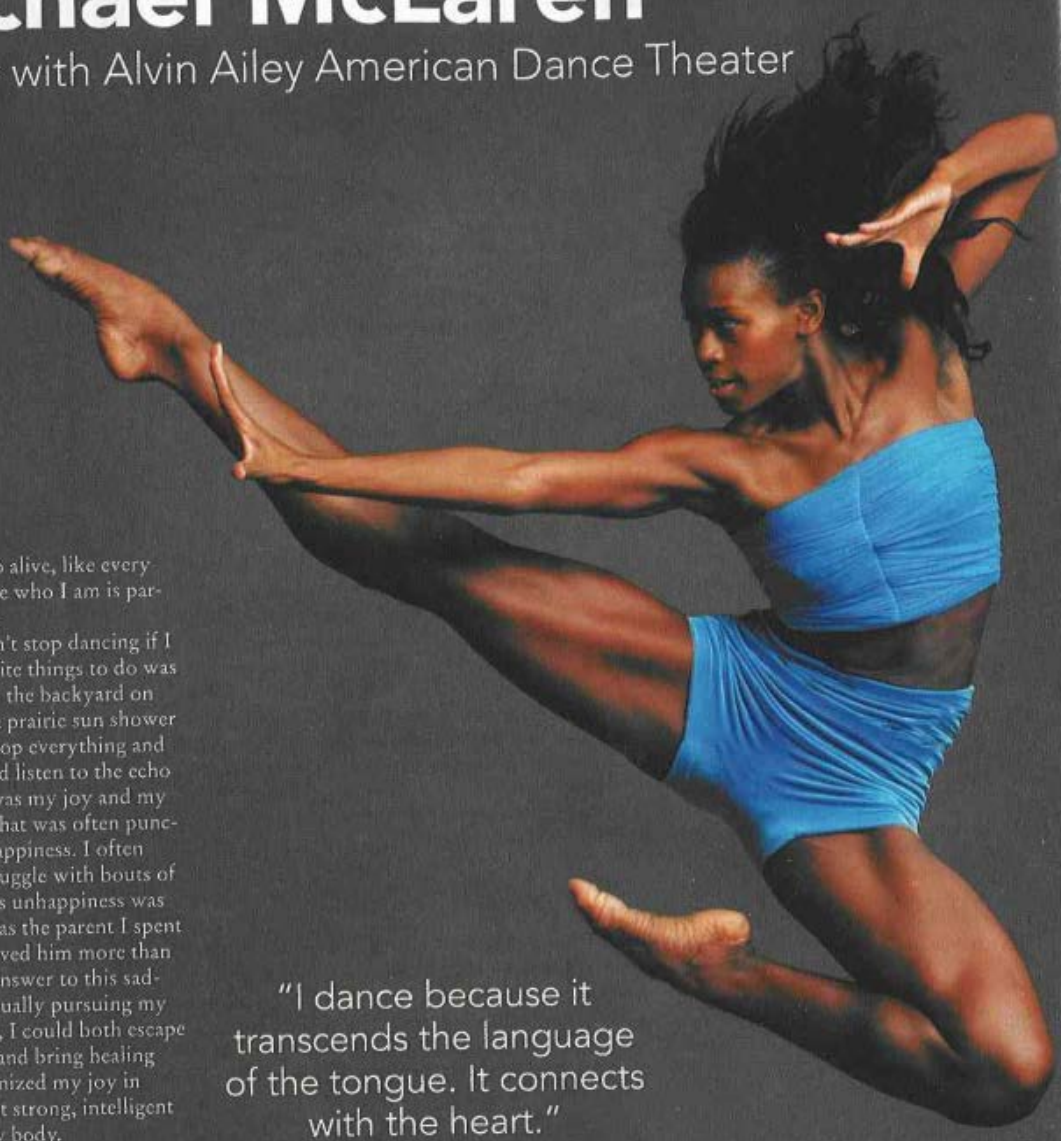
Dancer with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

When I'm dancing, I feel so alive, like every single part of me that makes me who I am is participating in moving my body.

When I was little, I wouldn't stop dancing if I could help it. One of my favorite things to do was to pretend to be Gene Kelly in the backyard on my parents' deck. As soon as a prairie sun shower came raining down I would drop everything and run out there to sing, laugh and listen to the echo of my tapping toes. Dancing was my joy and my therapy. I grew up in a home that was often punctuated by anger and deep unhappiness. I often helplessly watched my dad struggle with bouts of depression and aggression. His unhappiness was particularly hard for me; he was the parent I spent most of my time with and I loved him more than anything. Dance became my answer to this sadness. While dancing and eventually pursuing my dreams of doing it for a living, I could both escape the darker realities of my life and bring healing into my family's lives. I recognized my joy in dance as a gift from God. I felt strong, intelligent and fearless when I moved my body.

I dance because it is a language that transcends the language of the tongue. It connects with the heart, and it so beautifully and thoughtfully reflects the human condition. Dancing with the incredible Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has taught me so much about this.

A favorite moment was when I was invited to perform Alvin Ailey's solo masterpiece *Cry* as part of an event hosted by a branch of the United Nations that focused on fighting human trafficking. This event brought experts together to use data and their collective intelligence to try to solve one of the world's most urgent problems. I was there to use my body to offer a story of inextricable struggle, triumph and freedom in the



"I dance because it transcends the language of the tongue. It connects with the heart."

form of 17 intense minutes of dance. I was there to influence hearts and minds in a way that perhaps words can't.

My mantra when I'm in the wings before I step onstage is "Be generous, without fear or hope." Of course, there are times when I'm afraid I might execute a step poorly, especially if I'm exhausted or injured. And who doesn't hope to hear roaring applause after something they've done onstage? But at the end of the day, I believe that dance is an offering best committed to with a sense of purity. I dance to be a vessel for love, empathy, generosity and healing. That is why I dance! ■

Dance has provided McLaren with an escape from troubling realities.