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## Obama to honor icon of American dance

By CBS staff

Alvin Ailey was not just a dancer; many would call him a revolutionary. The creation of his company 56 years ago marked the start of a new era in dance, dedicated to the African-American experience. His vision, however, went beyond that, and today his company is not only one of the premier institutions of African American culture, it's now an ambassador of the shared human experience.

Now, 25 years after his death, Ailey will be awarded the nation's highest civilian honor by President Obama: the Presidential Medal of Freedom, reports CBS News correspondent Vinita Nair.

"Mr. Ailey said it so eloquently, he said that dance comes from the people, and it should always be delivered back to the people and that's what we do," Robert Battle, the third artistic director of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, told CBS News.



He will be accepting the award on behalf of Ailey.

"When I think about the shoes that I'm filling, I think more about the shoulders on which I stand, and then I think about Alvin Ailey," he said. "I think about what he made possible for so many people who look like me."

Ailey began his career in New York, on Broadway. In 1958, he founded his own company with just seven dancers.

Two years later he premiered "Revelations," a

dance based on his segregated childhood, using spirituals, gospel and blues. In the midst of the Civil Rights movement, it became a widely embraced celebration of African-American culture and his most famous performance to date.

"It was really about the human being and everything that the human being endures," Battle said.

The company has performed in 71 countries for more than 25 million people.

And from those seven original dancers, the Alvin Ailey Theater has grown to include hundreds of aspiring performers from every background.

"He wanted us to go out and see things, and read, watch the news, know what's going on around you because all of that will inform what happens on the stage," Battle said. "That's why I think when people come to an Ailey performance -- they don't just see it, but they feel it."

Alvin Ailey Dance Theater rehearsal director Matthew Rushing would agree. He saw his first Ailey performance when he was just 13 years old.

"For me, to be able to relate to what was going on stage and realize that some of the things that I was witnessing I've also gone through personally," he said. "I didn't know that was possible; to go to the theater and be able to relate to the artist."

Today, he's carrying on Ailey's mission. This season, that means choreographing a piece called "Odetta," based on the music of Odetta Holmes, who was an African-American folk singer in the 1950s. Her songs have been called the soundtrack of the Civil Rights movement, but the company hopes to introduce her to a new generation.

"For the first time, I really feel in my career -- whether it be dancing or choreography -- I felt like I commented on things that I was experiencing, what I saw in front of my face from day to day," Rushing said.

He was captivated by what he was seeing in the news.

"Because a lot of the racial tension that was going on in the states and seeing all these videos of young black men being treated the way they were treated, of course I couldn't turn that off going into the studio," he said.

Ailey died in 1989, but his mission lives on through today's performances.

"I repeatedly remembered that -- how people mention how we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us," Rushing said. "I feel like we all should take a moment to thank those shoulders that we stand on, and this goes directly into Mr. Ailey's vision. He's a broad pair of shoulders that we stand upon."

Alvin Ailey starts its 43rd consecutive season at New York City center next month.

**Watch video [here](#)**