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Danica Paulos, Solomon Dumas, and the Company in Mauro Bigonzetti's *Deep*

## STEP FROM THE STAGE TO THE STUDIO

Ailey's Performances Move Audiences  
to Join in the Dance

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By Lisa Jo  
Sagolla

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A professional dancer's body is a finely tuned instrument of movement and expression. And there are no more impeccably calibrated, eloquent "instruments" than those who make up the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Appearing at Lincoln Center's David H. Koch Theater from June 14-18, the Ailey dancers are performing six contemporary works that entered the company's repertory within the last year, along with a new production of Billy Wilson's exuberant Dizzy Gillespie tribute *The Winter in Lisbon* (1992), and Alvin Ailey's must-see masterpiece *Revelations* (1960). The illustrious company has been setting the standard for physical prowess on the modern dance stage for decades, and its members are continually lauded for their fierce athleticism, stunning artistry, and inspiring rhythmic sensibilities. So how did the Ailey dancers learn to move so magnificently? "Most of the company members are trained at The Ailey School," explained company member Solomon Dumas, who holds two Ailey distinctions. Not only is Dumas the first alumnus of



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Horton class at Ailey's permanent home, The Joan Weill Center for Dance

AileyCamp (a nationwide summer dance program for youth) to be invited to join the company, but he is the only company member to have been involved in every component of the Ailey organization. Starting as an AileyCamper in Chicago, he went on to study and later teach at The Ailey School in New York City, to perform with Ailey II, and to teach at Ailey Extension, which offers dance classes to the general public at Ailey's Manhattan headquarters—The Joan Weill Center for Dance. "I teach Horton, which is the signature technique of the Ailey organization. It's taught in AileyCamp, at The Ailey School, and at the Extension. It's a technique that really fortifies the body and it's not easy. The codified exercises—they're called 'fortifications'—are specifically designed to strengthen all parts of the body," said Dumas.

Characterized by flat back positions, hinges, and lateral T's (a balance on one leg, with the torso tilted sideward at a 90-degree angle and a leg extended in the other direction), the technique was codified during the late-1940s and early-1950s by Ailey's mentor, Lester Horton, at Horton's Dance Theatre academy in Los Angeles. "In order to perform any of Alvin Ailey's works, you have to have had an in-depth study of the Horton technique," explained former company member Lisa Johnson-Willingham, director of Ailey Extension. "Mr.

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Ailey took many of Horton's exercises and progressions across the floor and incorporated them into his choreography. When you watch *Revelations*, for example, you'll see some of the exercises you would do in a Horton class." One of the easiest moments to spot the technique is in the "I Wanna Be Ready" section of *Revelations*, which employs Horton's coccyx fortification, a movement phrase that involves transitioning the body from lying horizontally to balancing in a V-shape on the coccyx bone.

"I am a lover of the Horton technique and I find it has given me a strong base, a security. A lot of people find it quite linear in appearance, but it also has roundness, and circular aspects that give it a wonderful fullness," observed company member and choreographer Hope Boykin, whose work *r-Evolution, Dream*, is being performed during the Lincoln Center engagement.

While Horton technique undergirds the Ailey training, dancers at The Ailey School also study ballet, Graham-based modern technique, and contemporary dance, plus genres such as West African, jazz, and hip-hop, which correspond to the different styles contained in Ailey's works and the company's wide

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The Company's Jamar  
Roberts in Alvin Ailey's  
*Revelations*



Photo © Christopher Dugan





The Company in Hope  
Boykin's *r-Evolution*,  
*Dream*.

range of repertory by other choreographers. Boykin finds an implicit connection between the study of dance technique and the expressive performance of choreography. "The technique is what gives you the ability to be free and expressive," she said. "As a young person, we learned that the branches of a tree can only spread as far as the roots extend into the ground. We see only the beauty of the branches swaying and the leaves moving in the wind—that's what we appreciate—but those movements are only possible because of the tree's foundation. I don't believe a dancer's technical foundation and the choreography they perform onstage are separate at all."

The best way to truly understand the relationship between the technical training Ailey dancers undergo and what you see them do in performances is to take some dance technique classes yourself. "You'll have both a greater understanding of, and a deeper respect for, what you see onstage," said Dumas. And there's no better place to find those classes than at Ailey Extension—the program's name says it all. "Our mission is to give people a chance to extend that wonderful feeling they have after seeing the company perform, and to continue to develop a connection with the Ailey organization. Fans of *Revelations*



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Ailey Extension  
Director Lisa Johnson  
Willingham

should come and try a class in Horton technique,” said Johnson-Willingham. She also recommends ballet classes to help audience members understand how to “get up on your leg” the way a dancer must for *Revelations*’ “Fix Me Jesus,” and recommends West African Dance classes to learn how to “get grounded and undulate the body” and to develop a deeper understanding of the rituals involved in the piece.

Ailey Extension also offers many technique classes relevant to other works that will be performed this season. If you enjoy *The Winter in Lisbon*, Johnson-Willingham suggests taking jazz, theatre dance, or New York Style Mambo, one of the Extension’s newest offerings. Anyone intrigued by the storytelling in Boykin’s *r-Evolution*, *Dream.*, Mauro Bigonzetti’s *Deep*, Johan Inger’s *Walking Mad*, or artistic director Robert Battle’s *Mass* and *Ella* will want to study contemporary dance. And those attracted to the highly rhythmic passages of Kyle Abraham’s *Untitled America* may wish to try Afro-Cuban Folkloric classes to develop their ability to embody tricky Latin rhythms.

New Ailey Extension students can try their first class free with an Ailey performance ticket stub, and in celebration of NYC Dance Week (June 15-24), the Extension is offering 30 free classes in 16 different dance genres, including a class called “Contemporary Latin Jazz Fusion” which sounds irresistible to me. So what are you waiting for? Get moving!

*Lisa Jo Sagolla is the author of The Girl Who Fell Down: A Biography of Joan McCracken and Rock ‘n’ Roll Dances of the 1950s. She teaches at Columbia University.*