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Documentary proves a dance is more than just its steps

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Ailey ★★★☆

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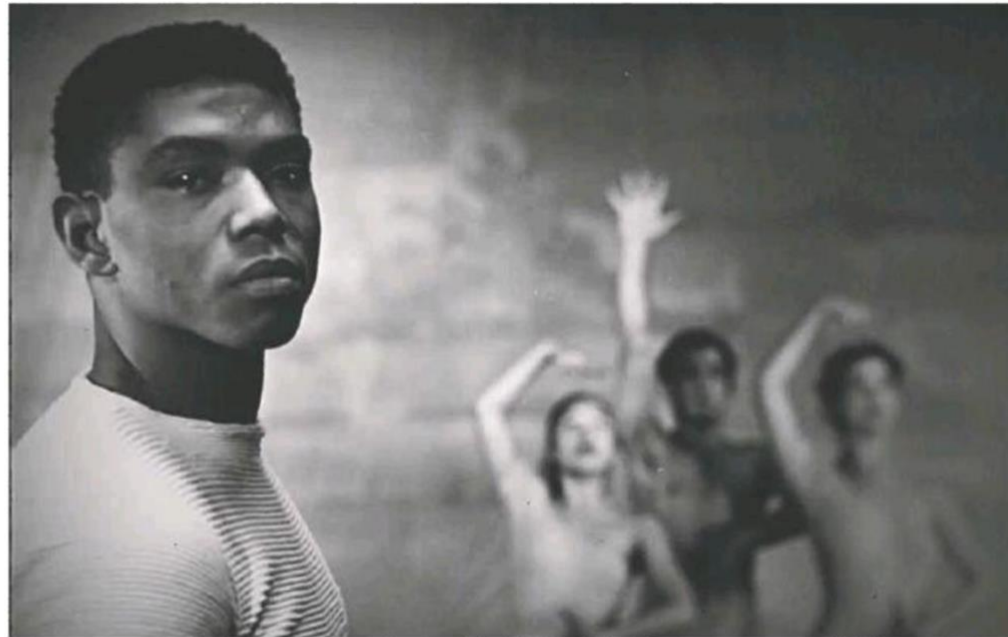
Memory was the anchor of famed choreographer Alvin Ailey's work, the fuel behind the joy and restraint in his massively successful fusion of Black culture, theater and modern dance in the 20th century.

That's what those who knew and worked with him say in new documentary "Ailey," which examines Ailey's life and explores how to best remember a man who died more than 30 years ago but still lives on in the steps of those learning the moves he committed to dance doctrine.

Through archival footage and audio — the film is essentially narrated by the man himself — interviews with contemporaries and those he inspired, and a look inside the studio of the modern-day Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, which celebrates its 60th anniversary in the film, "Ailey" attempts to understand an artist and his work while providing context to the turbulent times the choreographer found himself responding to through his medium.

Director Jamila Wignot intercuts archival and modern footage to show us different performances of the same dance across time, the company members connected by the through line of Ailey's intentions. His legacy is clear, and the messaging of struggle and joy in the context of the Black American experience resonates sharply.

Those unfamiliar with Ailey's



NEON

"Ailey" explores the life and work of choreographer Alvin Ailey, a man who found success fusing Black culture, theater and modern dance at the end of the last century. He died in 1989 at age 58.

work are presented with enough clips to have a solid understanding of what it was trying to achieve and why it has remained so relevant for more than a half-century. These moments are some of the strongest in the documentary, letting the poetry of Ailey's chosen language convey the depth of his genius.

The signature performance of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is "Revelations," an ex-

ploration of the Black American experience through dance set to gospel music and told from a Church-inspired perspective. The piece premiered in 1960, when he was 29 years old, and still remains his best-known work. "Ailey" smartly gives the viewer a look at plenty of his pieces other than "Revelations" while also giving the proper treatment such a massively popular show requires.

"Ailey" provides some neat con-

ceptual matter in the role of a dancer as a physical historian, carrying through the almost-impressionistic "blood memories" (as Ailey called them) of preceding ancestors as building to fluid, considered motion and then to full-fledged dances.

Despite the consideration of the weighty ideas he must have been developing, parts of Ailey seem unknowable and unseen in "Ailey," which finds its strength

more concretely in reflecting on the work itself and what a specific dance move means across the decades it's performed. That disparity between knowing the public and private spheres is obvious when "Ailey" turns to its subject's personal life, including episodes when he struggled with bipolar disorder and the pressure of what being Alvin Ailey entailed.

Ailey, who died at 58 in 1989 of an AIDS-related illness, kept his romantic affairs largely private for fear of rocking the boat too much as a choreographer who was both Black and gay, according to the film. In one extended sequence, a discussion of Ailey's homosexuality is accompanied by footage of him shaking hands with President Ronald Reagan and first lady Nancy Reagan, a reminder of the repressive social environment during the AIDS crisis. It adds another layer of context to the portrait Wignot paints of Ailey.

Watching the dances Ailey choreographed feels intimate itself, a picture of bone-deep pain and celebration as rendered through motion. The film brings a more human understanding of a figure so noteworthy he has earned mononym status for the title. Though we only see him in still images and old performance videos in "Ailey," he seems much closer.

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**PG-13.** At the Avalon. Contains brief strong language. 82 minutes.