



ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

AILEY II | THE AILEY SCHOOL | AILEY ARTS IN EDUCATION & COMMUNITY PROGRAMS | AILEY EXTENSION
The Joan Weill Center for Dance 405 West 55th St, New York NY 10019-4402 (212) 405-9000 AlvinAiley.org

PORTRAIT OF AILEY, A NEW EIGHT-PART DOCUMENTARY SERIES AVAILABLE FOR FREE ON PBS LEARNINGMEDIA

EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS ACCOMPANYING THE SERIES ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO EXPLORE THE PERPETUAL POWER OF DANCE

NEW YORK – February 29, 2024 – The compelling story of the life, work, and legacy of dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey, founder of the renowned Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, is the subject of *Portrait of Ailey*, a new eight-part documentary series premiering in February 2024, during Black History Month, and rolling out through September on PBS LearningMedia, a free website with thousands of classroom-ready resources for preK-12 teachers. The series was created by Sylvia Waters, director emerita of the Ailey II company, with archivist Dominique Singer and adapted for use on PBS LearningMedia by The WNET Group's Kids' Media & Education team. *Portrait of Ailey* uses rare historical film and still images as well as contemporary footage to create a sweeping narrative of Mr. Ailey as a performer, choreographer, celebrity, teacher, social activist, arts advocate, and creator of an enduring institution that is currently celebrating its 65th anniversary.

***Portrait of Ailey's* first two chapters are now available for educators on PBS LearningMedia ([Alvin Ailey's Texas Roots](#); [Alvin Ailey's California Inspirations](#)).** All chapters are accompanied by educational materials that introduce a new generation to Mr. Ailey and his legacy and encourages them to explore the impact of dance.

"When Mr. Ailey was alive, he often walked the hallways, dropped in on classes or into the student lounge with videos for viewing, and connected with everyone along the way," said series creator Sylvia Waters. "I wanted audiences today to feel something like that connection, so they will forever be inspired by his determination to 'bring dance back to the people.'"

The first two chapters of *Portrait of Ailey* narrate Mr. Ailey's earliest years in his own honest and poetic words and feature testimony from people who played major roles in his life, including his mother, Lula Cooper. Archival video and images of Mr. Ailey's first works, inspired by his "blood memories" as a Black man growing up in the Jim Crow South, tell the story of his roots in Texas and included spirituals from church, the music from workers in the field, and the songs of blues singers. Viewers follow Mr. Ailey through his arrival in Los Angeles as a teenager and his exposure to a vibrant new culture. Subsequent chapters and their educational materials will be released in April and September 2024.

The accompanying educational materials, presented on PBS LearningMedia, offer educators free access to enriching classroom instruction materials alongside engaging content created by Catherine Gallant and supervised by Cathryn Williams in collaboration with Ms. Waters and Ms. Singer. The educational materials serve to ignite curiosity about and interest in the work of Mr. Ailey and his groundbreaking legacy, enabling people of all races, ages, and cultural backgrounds to understand and appreciate the beauty and strength of this facet of African American heritage.

The educational materials have been adapted from the *Portrait of Ailey* study guide. "Through this guide, students have opportunities to engage in their own art making within the mediums of visual arts, poetry, music, and dance, responding to discussion, peer interaction, writing, and movement prompts," said Catherine Gallant. "We encourage students to build on what they learn about Alvin Ailey, using their own experience and knowledge to understand how dance expresses personal history, culture, and community experience."

Alvin Ailey was born on January 5, 1931, in Rogers, Texas, into a community that would eventually inspire many of his most memorable works, including the American masterpiece *Revelations*. He was introduced to dance in Los Angeles by performances of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and the Katherine Dunham Dance Company. His formal dance training began with an introduction to Lester Horton's classes by his friend Carmen de Lavallade. Horton, the founder of one of the first racially integrated dance companies in the United States, became a mentor for Mr. Ailey as he embarked on his professional career. After Horton's death in 1953, Mr. Ailey became director of the Lester Horton Dance Theater and began to choreograph his own works. In the 1950s and 60s, he performed in four Broadway shows, including *House of Flowers* and *Jamaica*.

In 1958, Mr. Ailey founded Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to carry out his vision of a company dedicated to enriching the American modern dance heritage and preserving the uniqueness of the African American cultural experience. He established the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center (now The Ailey School) in 1969 and formed the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble (now Ailey II) in 1974. Mr. Ailey was a pioneer of programs promoting arts in education, particularly those benefiting underserved communities. Throughout his lifetime, he received numerous awards, including the Kennedy Center Honor in 1988 in recognition of his extraordinary contribution to American culture. In 2014, he posthumously received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian honor, in recognition of his contributions to civil rights and dance in America. When Mr. Ailey died on December 1, 1989, *The New York Times* said of him, "you didn't need to have known [him] personally to have been touched by his humanity, enthusiasm, and exuberance and his courageous stand for multi-racial brotherhood."

"Making dances is an act of progress; it is an act of growth, an act of music, an act of teaching, an act of celebration, an act of joy," stated Alvin Ailey. "I'm trying to hold up a mirror to society so that people can see how beautiful they are." Mr. Ailey was dedicated to creating "a culture in which the young are not afraid to take chances and can hold onto their values and self-esteem, especially in the arts and in dance."

In addition to *Portrait of Ailey*, PBS is re-broadcasting the widely acclaimed documentary ***American Masters: AILEY*** (2021) by Jamila Wignot, giving viewers an opportunity to connect with Alvin Ailey's legendary artistic expression of the American Black experience and to see how it continues to thrive in the company he founded. Archival footage and interviews coupled with a behind-the-scenes look at today's Alvin Ailey organization reveal the depth of Mr. Ailey's legacy.

***American Masters: AILEY* will encore on PBS** throughout the spring and is available for streaming – check your local listings and [PBS.org](https://www.pbs.org). It is also available for streaming on PBS Passport, Hulu, and Amazon Prime.

To read a blog post on connecting dancer Alvin Ailey's life story with classrooms, visit [this link on THIRTEEN, America's flagship PBS station in New York](#).

For more **information** on Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater visit www.alvinailey.org.

For additional **press materials, including bios, b-roll, and photos**, members of the media may visit pressroom.alvinailey.org.

PRESS CONTACTS

Christopher Zunner – czunner@alvinailey.org

Tracy Severe – tsevere@alvinailey.org

ABOUT ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, recognized by U.S. Congressional resolution as a vital American “Cultural Ambassador to the World,” grew from a now-fabled March 1958 performance in New York that changed forever the perception of American dance. Founded by Alvin Ailey, recent posthumous recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom—the nation’s highest civilian honor—and guided by Judith Jamison beginning in 1989, the Company was led until 2023 by Robert Battle, whom Judith Jamison chose to succeed her on July 1, 2011. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has performed for an estimated 25 million people in 71 countries on 6 continents—as well as millions more through television broadcasts, film screenings, and online platforms—promoting the uniqueness of the African American cultural experience and the preservation and enrichment of the American modern dance tradition. In addition to being the Principal Dance Company of New York City Center, where its performances have become a year-end tradition, the Ailey company performs annually at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts; the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC; the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago; The Fox Theatre in Atlanta; Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley, CA, and at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark where it is the Principal Resident Affiliate, and appears frequently in other major theaters throughout the United States and the world during extensive yearly tours. The Ailey organization also includes Ailey II (1974), a second performing company of emerging young dancers and innovative choreographers; The Ailey School (1969), one of the most extensive dance training programs in the world; Ailey Arts in Education & Community Programs, which brings dance into the classrooms, communities, and lives of people of all ages; and Ailey Extension (2005), a program offering dance and fitness classes to the general public, which began with the opening of Ailey’s permanent home—the largest building dedicated to dance in New York City, the dance capital of the world—named The Joan Weill Center for Dance, at 55th Street at 9th Avenue in New York City. For more information, visit www.alvinailey.org.

###