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Welcome to Portrait of Ailey

Portrait of Ailey is a documentary in eight chapters that can be viewed separately or continuously. The accompanying curricular materials serve to ignite a curiosity about and interest in the work of American choreographer Alvin Ailey and his ground-breaking legacy that connects the beauty and humanity of the African-American heritage to unite people of all races, ages and cultural backgrounds.

Background of the project

Director Emerita of Ailey II, Sylvia Waters working with archivist Dominique Singer, created a documentary about American modern dance icon, Alvin Ailey. The documentary charts the course of Ailey's creative life from his earliest childhood influences to his professional collaborations with composers, designers and generations of dancers.

Using rare archival footage along with historical images from the times in which Ailey lived and worked, they have compiled a sweeping narrative of artistic process and progress. The project also includes the creation of a curriculum based on the chapters of the documentary titled, *Portrait of Ailey*. Taken as a whole the documentary and accompanying curriculum allows a new generation of

students to learn more about Ailey as a dancer, choreographer, celebrity, teacher, social activist, dance ambassador, arts advocate and supporter of new choreographic voices and visions.

During the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's 60th Anniversary celebration, Miss Waters realized while in the elevator of the organization's headquarters with Ailey students and staff, that no one knew Mr. Ailey — had heard him speak, and much less, seen him dance, rehearse, or choreograph. It occurred to her that Mr. Ailey wasn't accessible on any level to all those who are part of the Ailey organization. When alive, he often walked the hallways, dropped in on classes or into the student lounge and connected with everyone along the way. Recognizing that Mr. Ailey's legacy is inseparable from Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation's mission, Miss Waters saw a need for others to understand his significance and was inspired to create *Portrait of Ailey*, so that all who walked through the doors of the Joan Weill Center for Dance would forever be inspired by his iconic wish to "bring dance back to the people."

Alvin Ailey - biography (from Ailey website)



Alvin Ailey was born on January 5, 1931, in Rogers, Texas. His experiences of life in the rural South would later inspire some of his most memorable works. He was introduced to dance in Los Angeles by performances of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and the Katherine Dunham Dance Company, and 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, Mr. Ailey performed in four Broadway shows, including *House of Flowers* and *Jamaica*.

In 1958, he 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 was awarded numerous distinctions, 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 and commitment 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."

Portrait of Ailey - Overview of Module 1

In this study guide teachers and students learn together as they respond to the timeline and details of Ailey's development from childhood to young adulthood. Before launching the module, students share any general or specific prior knowledge they may have about Ailey, related US history, artists and dance.

In a comfortable and stimulating atmosphere students will view the documentary chapters followed by discussion prompts to guide a whole group conversation. Teachers propose reflective questions such as, "What part of Alvin Ailey's early life experiences resonate with you?" "How are contemporary artists facing similar struggles and successes?" In pairs or small groups students will cooperate and collaborate on a response task designed to clarify concepts and explore tools for creating a short study in movement, sound, text or design.

Students respond through discussion, peer interaction, writing and movement prompts to engage in art making within the mediums of visual arts, poetry, music and dance. Using their prior experiences and knowledge, students are encouraged to think of themselves as creators in response to the artistry of Alvin Ailey and his life trajectory. Capturing and sharing student work is a key component of nurturing creative response to art works.

Module Overview and Video viewing of Chapter 1 Texas Roots

Lesson Experience 1- *(suggested time one to two 50 minute sessions)*

Target audience: high school students grades 10th-12th (age 16 and beyond)

Before viewing Chapter 1 and 2 of the documentary, Portrait of Ailey, begin a discussion with the following question:

What is a documentary?

This video about Alvin Ailey's life is a documentary. What kind of film is a documentary? What are the elements of a documentary and how are they conceived and organized? How is a documentary different from a fictional account of someone's life? What careers are represented in the making of a documentary? For example, in this documentary there is a director, producer, archivist and video/film editor. What other roles and job titles contribute to the making of a documentary?

GOALS/OBJECTIVES:

- Introduce teachers and students to the work of modern dance icon, Alvin Ailey
- Identify the ways that dance expresses personal history, culture and community experience in choreographic works
- Explore the inspirations and influences that led Alvin Ailey to a life of dance-making and dance advocacy
- Understand the various careers/jobs involved in the making of a documentary

Students will:

- Engage in video viewing

Portrait of Ailey Unit 1 Inspirations and Influences (chapters 1 and 2)

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- Respond to questions that probe the information and issues presented in the documentary
- Reflect on their own personal connections to Ailey's life experiences
- Create dance/art making mini works in response to assigned tasks independently and/or collaboratively

In the first two chapters of ***Portrait of Ailey***, former dancer and Director Emerita of Ailey II, Sylvia Waters, shares the earliest influences on Alvin Ailey's life using his own honest and poetic words. We also hear from those who played major roles in his development as a dancer and choreographer, including his mother, Lula Elizabeth Ailey. Through archival video and images of Ailey's first works, we see the artist's passion and perseverance form his identity and his pathway towards dance as an expressive and inclusive art form.

VIEW *Portrait of Ailey* Chapter 1 *Texas Roots* synopsis:



Alvin Ailey tells us about his roots in Texas and how that influenced his choreography. These early experiences — what he called "blood memories" — included the music from church, the field workers, the songs of blues singers, and the deep explicit racism of his time. Alvin Ailey identified himself as a "black man whose roots are in the sun and the dirt of the South". He recalled traveling from place to place with his single mother. This nomadic experience created a need to belong to family and community. From the beginning, he wanted to bring "dance back to the people". He used his perceptive powers to transform these "blood memories" into art through movement.

After viewing ***Portrait of Ailey, Chapter 1 Texas Roots***

Engage in discussion. Use these questions to start the conversation.

- How did Ailey's early memories influence his imagination and urge to create?
- How did Alvin Ailey's work ask audiences to reflect on the role of black culture in society at the time?
- How do we perceive Ailey's works now?

Lesson Experience 2 (suggested time one to two 50 minute sessions)

Essential Questions:

How are portraits created?

What is the role of memory in the creative process?

When and how does art/dance provoke change to perceptions about social justice?

Goals/Objectives:

Access memory to ignite creative response

Consider the role of mentors and positive influences in one's life journey

Create a portrait using visual arts, spoken or sung text or movement

Think Pair Share:

Think of one of your earliest memories. Share with a partner and discuss why you think this memory has stayed with you. Make one gesture that embodies this memory. Teach your gesture to your partner and learn their gesture. How does this begin to create a dance?

Improvisational Movement activity:

Identify **three** gestures or actions from Ailey's choreography after viewing Chapter 1 in the Module **Inspirations and Influences**. Students offer movement that they recall and give their gesture/action a name. Write these on a piece of paper or project on screen for the whole group to see. Teacher leads students in an exploration of the suggested movements and combines the actions to make a short sequence. This can be done in silence or use music from the Revelations [playlist from the Ailey website](#).

Reflection and art making response: *(students create in class or as an optional assignment)*

What is a portrait?

We think of a portrait as being an image of someone's face created as a photo, a drawing or painting but it could also be sung, danced or written. Create a portrait of someone. This could be someone you know or a person you'd like to learn more about. It could even be a self-portrait. A drawing or painting, a sung portrait made up of words that someone often says or a danced portrait. A danced portrait could be an embodiment of the key characteristics of how someone moves, such as movements of the head, gestures with hands, sitting, standing or touching/holding objects.

Use the **Movement Analysis Worksheet** in the Teacher Resource section to help with describing movement. This chart detailing elements of Body, Actions, Space, Time and Energy can assist with categorizing and analyzing movement.

Note to teachers: Portraits of all types may be shared via online folders, as part of an in-school display or through performance.

For further exploration students may do research to learn more about the artists that influenced Alvin Ailey. See links below.

Artist/Performer references in Chapter 1

[Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup](#)

[Tampa Red](#)

**VIEW Portrait of Ailey Chapter 2 California Inspires**

As a teenager, Alvin Ailey had a broad interest in the visual arts and creative writing. When he arrived in Los Angeles he was exposed to a vibrant culture of performance. Music, film, vaudeville, ballet — from the extravagance of the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo to the fateful day when he saw Katherine Dunham performing with her all-black company — all opened a new world. Alvin Ailey was a gymnast. When his high-school friend Carmen De

Lavallade saw him move, she urged him to come with her to a class taught by Lester Horton. Horton's school and dance company became Ailey's artistic home.

Engage in discussion. Use these questions to start the conversation.

- How were teachers, friends and colleagues supportive of Alvin Ailey's development?
- What were Ailey's first steps toward a life in dance?
- Why did Carmen de Lavallade say that young men didn't talk about wanting to dance?
- How did seeing the work of Katherine Dunham change Ailey's view of dance and its potential?
- How did Lester Horton influence Ailey's vision for forming his own dance company?

After viewing Chapter 2 **Portrait of Ailey, Chapter 2 California Inspires**

Lesson Experience 1 *(suggested time one to two 50 minute sessions)***Essential Questions:**

How do individuals and communities support or hinder artistic growth?

What did Alvin Ailey mean when he said "dance is a calling...you **have** to do it"?

How does a young person know that they are an artist?

Goals/Objectives:

Learn about Alvin Ailey's influential teachers, Dunham, Horton and Cole

Identify personal inspirations and influences

Provide feedback to peers through guided discussion and reflective writing

Think Pair Share:

Think of one of your positive influences. Think about someone in your life who has had a strong positive influence on you and your development. This could be a family member, teacher, friend, vocal artist, author or political figure. What are words or phrases you recall? How do your senses of touch and hearing impact your memories of this person? Let any words that come to your mind and write them on paper or on your device. Share with a partner and discuss how this person has been influential to you. You may choose to create an acrostic poem, a gesture portrait, a song, rhythmic pattern and/or drawing related to this person.

Improvisational Movement activity

Portrait of Ailey Unit 1 Inspirations and Influences (chapters 1 and 2) C. Gallant May 1, 2023

Identify three gestures from viewing Chapter 2 in the Module *Inspirations and Influences*.

Identify **three** gestures or actions from Ailey's choreography after viewing Chapter 2 in the Module ***Inspirations and Influences***. Students offer movement that they recall and give their gesture/action a name. Write these on a wall chart or project on a screen for the whole group to see. Teacher leads students in an exploration of the suggested movements and combines the actions to make a short sequence. Divide the group in half with one group observing while the other individuals perform their short sequence. [Here](#) is music from the documentary soundtrack.

Lesson Experience 2 (students may focus on reflection or research)

Reflection and art making response: (students create in class or as an optional assignment)

Ailey talks about the inspiration of dancer/choreographers Katherine Dunham, Lester Horton and Jack Cole. How did they ignite his vision and move him towards dance as an artist?

What artists are currently influencing your view of the world? Create a **2 minute** mini-documentary about your favorite artist/entertainer or think about the person you identified as an important influence in your life. Use your phone and/or computer to experiment with the documentary format. Find an interesting way to share your topic using narration, visual imagery, interviews and your unique point of view. Edit your video and add audio. Remember that you must be aware of copyrights and permissions if using material downloaded from the web.

Research one of Alvin Ailey's influences to learn more about the arts in dance and music in the 1940's and 50's. Topics could include jazz, popular dance, social dance, honky tonk, financial depression of the 1930's or any one of Alvin Ailey's influences. See list below.

Who were Alvin Ailey's main Inspirations and Influences?

Katherine Dunham: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katherine_Dunham

Lester Horton: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lester_Horton

Jack Cole: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Cole_\(choreographer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Cole_(choreographer))

Chapter 2

[Pig Meat Markam](#)

[Lena Horne](#) (PBS)

[Duke Ellington](#) (PBS)

[Carmen DeLavallade](#) (Ailey site) [Carmen Delavallade](#) (PBS)

[Anna Halpren](#)

[Maya Angelou](#) (PBS)

Alvin Ailey's Choreography referenced in Chapter: 2

Revelations - [Sinner Man](#)

Lester Horton - [Liberian Suite](#)

Lester Horton - [To Jose Clemente Orozco](#)

Resources for further study:

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater - website

Books

- Alvin Ailey: A Life In Dance, Jennifer Dunning. Da Capo Press, 1998
- Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture, Thomas F. DeFrantz, Oxford Press, 2006
- Revelations, A. Peter Bailey, Birch Lane Press 1995
- Alvin Ailey, Jr.: A Life in Dance Julinda Lewis-Ferguson, Walker & Co
- Ailey Ascending: A Portrait in Motion, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Chronicle Books, 2008
- *Lester Horton, Modern Dance Pioneer* by Larry Warren
- *Katherine Dunham, Dance and the African Diaspora* by Joanna Dee Das

Articles/websites

[Alvin Ailey's legacy continues to inspire across generations | American Masters | PBS](#)

[A week in the life of an Ailey dancer | American Masters | PBS](#)

[10 dances to know by Alvin Ailey | American Masters | PBS](#)

Video resources....

[Celebrating Revelations at 50 Film on Vimeo](#) (linked from Ailey site)

Memories and Visions, WNET 1974

In the Company of Alvin Ailey, WNET 1978

A is Alvin, 1989 (owned by AADF)

Other examples of documentaries-PBS

[Public Art: New York City | PBS American Portrait](#)

<https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/fbk19-ss-refugee/integrating-into-a-new-culture-as-a-refugee-films-by-kids/>

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page 4: Courtesy of the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation Inc. Archives.

page 6: Photography by Zachary Freyman, Courtesy of the Bob Kohler Estate and Andy Humm. Zachary Freyman Collection, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

Music credits:

Ellis Marsalis Trio: Syndrome <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BVzJwslco>

Mary Lou Williams: Mary Lou's Mass

<https://folkways.si.edu/mary-lou-williams/mass/jazz-ragtime/music/album/smithsonian>

Lonnie Liston and the Cosmic Echoes: Saïs <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3SYF1yJOiYo>

Louis Armstrong and Leon Thomas: The Creator has a Plan <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afaebb1A5rk>

Gato Barbieri: Tupac Amaru <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdZ1JYmrAyM>

Teacher Resource Guide

Note to educators:

The self-narration of Ailey's life as he grew into an artist contains real connections to the world around him and how he negotiated the forces that unfairly acted upon the lives of black people in the US. Poverty, racism, the Ku Klux Klan, working in the fields picking cotton, Jim Crow laws and the search for a place to call home were all part of the intergenerational trauma inflicted through the legacy of slavery. Fostering an open and supported discussion of these topics allows students to process and navigate the past and current injustices of our society as they acknowledge these in relation to their own lives.

About the Lesson Experiences:

Each learning experience includes video viewing as the primary source material for exploring dance content and connections to other curricular areas such as US History, Economics, Sociology, Technology, Music, Visual Arts and Theater. Video segments are approximately 7-13 minutes each and provide a variety of entry points for student engagement and exploration. The material could be shared as a single exposure to the choreographic work of Alvin Ailey or extended to involve students in art making experiences to deepen their understanding of dance as an expressive form capable of sharing both personal and political viewpoints. Suggested optional extensions are included for students to work outside of the class time either independently or collaboratively.

Each lesson experience includes three tasks and/or explorations. These may be used in part or in any combination or sequence to support student engagement and learning.

The lesson experiences are guided by Essential Questions to deepen thinking from the outset and provide impetus for generating productive and meaningful discussion. Goals and objectives are provided as a way to structure the learning experience and show options for scaffolding the content for all learners. A collaborative model for discussion, exploration and creation encourages risk taking and innovation in response to content of each lesson experience.

Extensive resources for further investigation and study have been provided for both teachers and students to extend learning beyond the classroom. As with any curricular structure new ideas and directions may emerge to be considered and added to what is offered here.

Movement Analysis Worksheet **B.A.S.T.E.**

BODY HOW WERE THE DANCER'S BODIES USED? WHAT BODY CHARACTERISTICS DID YOU NOTICE? HOW WERE DIFFERENT BODY PARTS USED? WHAT SHAPES DID THE BODY MAKE?

ACTIONS WHAT MOVEMENT OR ACTIONS DID THE DANCER(S) MAKE?

SPACE WHAT PATTERNS IN SPACE DID THE DANCER USE?

TIME WHAT ASPECTS OF TIME WERE USED? WHAT DID YOU NOTICE ABOUT THE DANCER'S RHYTHMS? WERE THERE ACCENTS? WAS THE DANCING FAST OR SLOW?

ENERGY HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE ENERGY OF THE DANCERS AND THE DANCE?