



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Jacquelin Harris. Photo by Dario Calmese.

Study Guide

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 19, 2023

11AM | Jackson Hall

Recommended for grades 3-12

Mondavi Center
UCDAVIS

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California Arts Standards

The 2019 California Arts Standards provide guidance toward a common goal: for all California students to fully participate in a rich and well-rounded arts education. The standards are based on the **artistic processes of creating; performing/producing/presenting; responding;** and **connecting**. Our school matinéés correspond to responding and connecting:

- **Responding**—Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and Analyze Artistic Work; Standard 8: Interpret Intent and Meaning in Artistic Work; Anchor Standard 9: Apply Criteria to Evaluate Artistic Work
- **Connecting**—Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and Relate Knowledge and Personal Experiences to Make Art; Anchor Standard 11: Relate Artistic Ideas and Works with Societal, Cultural, and Historical Context to Deepen Understanding

Common Core Standards

Common Core broadens the definition of a “text,” viewing performance as a form of text, so students are experiencing and interacting with a text when they attend a performance. Seeing live performance provides rich opportunities to write reflections, narratives, arguments etc:

3-12RL.2; 3-12R.4-7; 3-12.RI.7-8; 3-12SL.2; 3-12SL.4



Robert Battle, Matthew Rushing, Ronni Favors and members of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Photo by Dario Calmese

About Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

The **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater** is a modern dance company based in New York City. It was founded in 1958 by choreographer and dancer Alvin Ailey. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater grew from a now-fabled performance in March 1958 at the 92nd Street Y in New York City. Led by Alvin Ailey and a group of young African-American modern dancers, that performance changed forever the perception of American dance. The Ailey company has gone on to perform for an estimated 25 million people at theaters in 48 states and 71 countries on six continents – and has reached millions more online and through television broadcasts.

In 2008, a U.S. Congressional resolution designated the Company as “a vital American cultural ambassador to the world” that celebrates the uniqueness of the African-American cultural experience and the preservation and enrichment of the American modern dance heritage.



Alvin Ailey. Photo by Jack Mitchell. © Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, Inc. and Smithsonian Institution

Alvin Ailey

When Mr. Ailey began creating dances, he drew upon his “blood memories” of Texas, the blues, spirituals, and gospel as inspiration, which resulted in the creation of his most popular and critically acclaimed work, *Revelations*, now celebrating 60 years.

Although he created 79 ballets over his lifetime, Mr. Ailey maintained that his company was not exclusively a repository for his own work. Today, the Company continues Mr. Ailey’s mission by presenting important works of the past and commissioning new ones. In all, more than 235 works by over 90 choreographers have been part of the Ailey company’s repertory.



Judith Jamison. Photo by Jack Mitchell

Judith Jamison

Judith Jamison joined Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1965 and quickly became an international star. Over the next 15 years, Mr. Ailey created some of his most enduring roles for her, most notably the tour-de-force solo *Cry*. Mr. Ailey asked her to succeed him as Artistic Director in 1989. In the 21 years that followed, she brought the Company to unprecedented heights – including two historic engagements in South Africa and a celebration of the Company’s 50th anniversary. Ms. Jamison personally selected Robert Battle to succeed her in 2011, making him only the third person to head the Company since it was founded.



Artistic Director Robert Battle.
Photo by Dario Calmese

Robert Battle

Mr. Battle has a long-standing association with the Ailey organization. A frequent choreographer and artist in residence at Ailey since 1999, he has set many of his works on Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Ailey II, and at The Ailey School. The Company’s repertory includes his ballets *Awakening*, *Ella*, *For Four*, *The Hunt*, *In/Side*, *Juba*, *Mass*, *No Longer Silent*, *Strange Humors*, *Takademe* and *Unfold*. In addition to expanding the Ailey repertory with works by artists as diverse as Kyle Abraham, Mauro Bigonzetti, Ronald K. Brown, Rennie Harris, and Paul Taylor, Mr. Battle has also instituted the New Directions Choreography Lab to help develop the next generation of choreographers.

The School Matinee program will consist of excerpts from *Are You in Your Feelings* and *Revelations*:

Are You in Your Feelings

Acclaimed choreographer Kyle Abraham's newest work is a celebration of Black culture, Black music, and the youthful spirit that perseveres in us all. Scored to a "mixtape" of soul, hip-hop, and R&B, it explores the connections among music, communication, and personal memory. It premiered in New York City in December 2022.

Kyle Abraham has been commissioned to create dances for companies including Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, The National Ballet of Cuba, New York City Ballet, and The Royal Ballet. Abraham has also choreographed for many of the leading dancers of our time, including Misty Copeland, Calvin Royal III, and Wendy Whelan. He is the founder of A.I.M by Kyle Abraham, widely considered "one of the most consistently excellent troupes working today" (*The New York Times*). Led by Abraham's innovative vision, the work of A.I.M is galvanized by Black culture and history and grounded in a conglomeration of unique perspectives.

Revelations

Since its creation in 1960, *Revelations* has consistently enraptured audiences all over the world with its perfect blend of reverent grace and spiritual elation. Alvin Ailey's signature masterpiece pays homage to and reflects the cultural heritage of the African-American, which Ailey considered one of America's richest treasures – "sometimes sorrowful, sometimes jubilant, but always hopeful." Choreographed when he was only 29 years old, *Revelations* is an intimate reflection inspired by childhood memories of attending services at Mount Olive Baptist Church in Texas, and by the work of writers James Baldwin and Langston Hughes. Set to a suite of traditional spirituals, *Revelations* explores the emotional spectrum of the human condition, from the deepest of grief to the holiest joy. A classic tribute to the resolve and determination of a people, the ballet has been seen by more people around the world than any other modern work.



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Kyle Abraham's *Are You in Your Feelings*?. Photo by Paul Kolnik



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Khalia Campbell and Courtney Celeste Spears in Kyle Abraham's *Are You in Your Feelings*?. Photo by Paul Kolnik



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*. Photo © Tony Powell



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*. Photo by Paul Kolnik

Learn More:

Alvin Ailey American Dance

Theater website: www.alvinailey.org
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alvin_Ailey_American_Dance_Theater

'Revelations' by Alvin Ailey

preview: www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNqaixKbrjs

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revelations_\(Alvin_Ailey\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revelations_(Alvin_Ailey))

Follow Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ailey II, The Ailey School, and Ailey Extension on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube

Books for Students

My Story, My Dance: Robert Battle's Journey to Alvin Ailey.
Lesa Celine-Ransome, Simon & Schuster/Paula Wiseman Books, 2015.

A Young Dancer: The Life of an Ailey Student.
Valerie Gladstone, Henry Holt and Co., 2009.

Reaching for Dreams: A Ballet from Rehearsal to Opening Night.
Susan Kuklin, Writers Club Press, 2001.

Alvin Ailey, Jr. A Life in Dance.
Julinda Lewis-Ferguson, Walker Publishing Company, 1994.

Alvin Ailey, Jr. Changing Our World. Kathleen Solomon Proboz, Bantam Skylark, 1992.



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*. Photo by Dario Calmese

The Basic Elements of Dance

Body: The dancer's unique and distinctive instrument capable of grand and discrete movement in infinite combinations.

Time: A measurable period during which movement or dance occurs. Dance makes the passage of time felt by dividing it into anything from complex, rhythmic patterns to long, unbroken stillness.

Space: The whole design and use of the place in which a dance unfolds.

Energy: The amount or force of the movement, also sometimes referred to as the color or texture of the movement.

Dance productions sometimes incorporate some of the following theatrical elements:

Scenery: The environment or setting of a dance, created through the use of, e.g., painted flats, painted backdrops, back curtains, lighting and/or slides on a cyclorama, a white screen-like curtain at the back of the stage.

Props: Items used to create a sense of place, or items used by the dancers in the movements of the dance.

Score: The musical or sound accompaniment for the dance, which may be created for the dance or may be preexisting music or sound.

Stage lights: Electrical equipment used to illuminate the stage or an area of the stage or to suggest a mood or setting.

Backstage: The area around and behind the stage where theater technicians work, and dancers enter and exit the stage.



AileyDance Kids Bronx Charter School for Excellence final performance. Photo by Joe Epstein



Dual Language Middle School Students. Photo by Nicole Tintle

Classroom Activities

Mirroring

To explore the concept of working as an ensemble, try a simple “mirroring” exercise. Ask students to find a partner. Designate one person in each pair as the leader and the other as the “mirror reflection.” As the “leader” in each pair moves (limit movement choices to the hands, arms, head and upper back), the “mirror” acts as the leader’s reflection, following the leader exactly. Very slow, smooth movement helps the mirror to stay precisely with the leader. Trade places so that the leader becomes the mirror and vice versa. Slow, sustained accompanying music helps the students focus. If the exercise is done well, it is impossible to see which person is leading. An excellent exercise for developing concentration, mirroring also helps students understand the nonverbal sensitivity dancers need in order to work on stage with other people.

Translating Everyday Movement to Dance

Much of dance movement onstage comes from everyday movement. This real-life movement is often transformed or exaggerated as it becomes dance movement. This transformation produces stylized movement which is recognizable, yet different. Trying this process of stylizing movement will help the students understand how the movements they do every day forms the basis for dance. Have the class pick a category of everyday movements, e.g., ways of saying “hello,” sports movements, getting-ready-in-the-morning movements. Choose a single movement from the category, such as waving “Hello.” Make the arm wave larger than usual so that it becomes an arc taking the whole body out in space. Next, try the arm wave in very slow motion. Finally, try the arm wave while doing a turn with the whole body. The arm wave has just become stylized like many dance movements. Discuss if you can still identify the movement as an arm wave. Also observe if the wave takes on a new or different look from its original form. Select another movement, e.g., a handshake or a football toss. Stylize the movement in the same three ways as above; large, slowly, and turning. Alert students to spotting examples of everyday movements in the dance performance.

Discussion Before the Performance

1. Movement is a language as rich and expressive as written or spoken language. Much of this movement language is understood by all humans around the world. Because we understand and use movement language so readily, we are often not conscious of the many ways in which we use it to communicate. Encourage the class to make a list of ways in which we use movement to communicate, e.g., expressing emotions, giving directions, accomplishing tasks, teaching, playing, worshiping, entertaining, or telling a story.
2. Discuss the role dance plays in various cultures through social dances and folk dances. Ask students to describe or demonstrate social dances or folk dances that are traditional in their cultures. In which cultures does dance play an important role? Why?
3. Initiate an age-appropriate discussion about racism and breaking racial barriers to help students appreciate the groundbreaking work accomplished by Alvin Ailey. Like African-Americans in other fields, artists have struggled for opportunities to train and perform in their art forms. Mr. Ailey fortunately encountered a unique teacher, Lester Horton, who helped many dancers past the barriers that existed in the 1940s. Another Horton student of Ailey's era, Janet Collins, became the first African-American classical ballerina. Invited to join the famed Ballet Russes in the 1940s, Collins was asked to use body make-up to appear "white." She refused. Collins later joined the Metropolitan Opera Ballet. The recollections of artists of color provide a strong narrative about racial issues in the United States, past and present. Lead a discussion of these issues using Ailey's life as an example.



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Michael Jackson Jr. and James Gilmer in Kyle Abraham's *Are You in Your Feelings?*. Photo by Paul Kolnik

Discussion After the Performance

1. In discussing a dance performance, it is often more productive to ask the question, "What did you see in the dance?" or "What do you remember most strongly from the dance?" rather than "Did you like the dance?" The first two questions lead to observation or analysis of the performance, while the third question encourages judgmental responses. Although an audience should respond both positively and negatively to a dance, critique should come into play later in the discussion process. Discussion of what aspect of a dance stays most strongly in the memory often reveals the choreographic choices at the heart of the work. Have students describe a memorable moment from the dance in various ways—verbally, in writing, by drawing, or through movement.
2. The Ailey performance offers opportunities for language arts activities. Have each student make a list of action words (verbs) and descriptive words (adjectives and adverbs) generated by the performance or a particular part of the performance. Emphasize the descriptive aspect of the words, e.g., verbs like bend, bounce, twist, melt, and explode, and adjectives like smooth, trembling, open, linear, and heavy. Create a list of verbs, adjectives, and adverbs contributed by the class. Discuss whether the list is highly varied or if many of the words are similar. What does this reveal about the dances that inspired the words?
3. The process of choreography is similar to written language—assembling words (movements) into sentences (phrases). Give the class the opportunity to make sentences in movement. Review the everyday movements listed by your students in "Before the Performance" Activity 2. Have the students demonstrate everyday movements they remember from the performance, e.g., a walk, hug, a nod, or a pointing finger. Have the class choose four movements that will serve as basic material for the students to use. Divide the class into small groups. Each group will work together as a single choreographer and use the four movements to create a movement sequence. All four movements must be used, but they may be placed in any order. One movement may be repeated at the beginning, middle, or end of the pattern. Each group can also choose its spatial formation; a line, circle, clump, wedge, or soloist with chorus are some possibilities. Have each group show its movement sequence to the rest of the class. Ask each group to describe its decision-making process.

Source: *Ailey Arts In Education & Community Programs Resource Guide for Teachers*



Attending the Theatre

What is expected of student audiences at the matinee:

- To facilitate starting the performance on time, get a drink of water and use the restroom before entering the seating area
- Enter the auditorium quietly and take your seats immediately (note that all matinees have reserved seating)
- Show courtesy to the artists and other guests at all times
- Demonstrate appreciation for the artists' work by applauding
- Refrain from making unnecessary noise or movements
- Please eat lunch before or after the performance. Food is not allowed in the theatre
- Use information learned from the pre-matinee discussion to enhance the performance experience
- Please do not photograph or record the artists



What your students can expect of their experience at the Mondavi Center

A theatre is a charged space, full of energy and anticipation. When the house lights (the lights that illuminate the audience seating) go down, the excitement level goes up! Theatres are designed so that the voices of the singers and actors and the music of the musicians can be heard. But this also means that any sound in the audience: whispering, speaking and moving about, can be heard by other audience members and by the performers. Distractions like these disrupt everyone's concentration and can spoil a performance.

The performers on stage show respect for their art form and for the audience by doing their very best work. By watching attentively, the audience shows respect for the performers. Appreciation can be shown in many different ways, depending upon the art form and the culture(s) of the people in the audience. For instance, while the audience at a dance performance may sit quietly, other types of performances may invite audience participation.

Applause is the best way for audience members to share their enthusiasm and to show their appreciation for the performers. Applaud at the end of a performance! Sometimes the audience will clap during a performance, as after a featured solo. Audience members may feel like laughing if the action on stage is funny, crying if the action is sad, or sighing if something is seen or heard that is beautiful.



Mondavi Center Arts Education

Ruth Rosenberg, Director of Arts Education and Artist Engagement

Jennifer Mast, Business Services and Arts Education Coordinator

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