

In step with genius

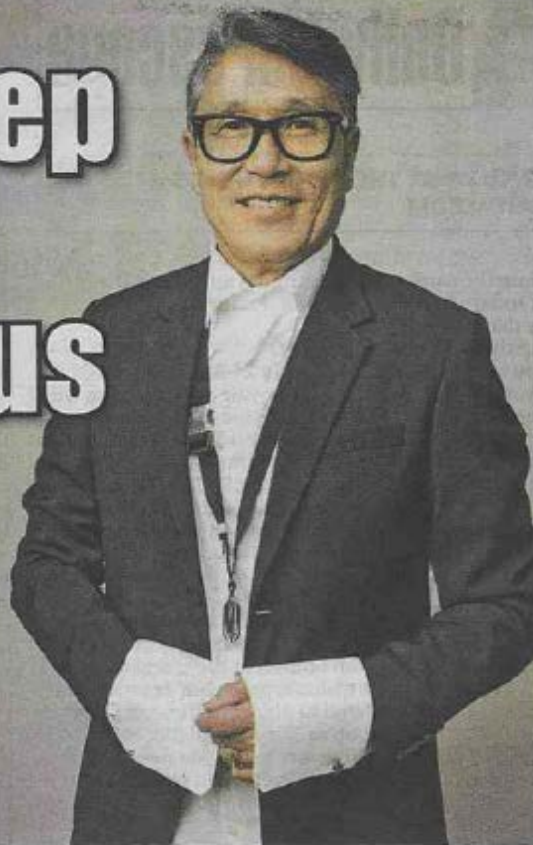
By: Barbara Hoffman

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Hot Ticket

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For 47 years, Masazumi Chaya has overseen Alvin Ailey's dancers — and now he's ready to move on



Andrew Eccles

By BARBARA HOFFMAN

MASAZUMI Chaya, a doctor and nurse's son from Japan, expected to go to medical school. But at 17, he took a jazz-dance class and started performing on TV shows there. By 21, he wondered just how good a dancer he really was. He wanted to test himself — so he went to New York.

On Dec. 26, 1970, he landed at JFK with \$1,000 and barely enough English (please, thank you, hello) to get by. Two years later, he joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. He never left, soaring from dancer to associate artistic director.

Now, 47 years later, the youthful 72-year-old believes it's time to step down. He'll focus on licensing Ailey works around the world while other company members fill his Prada shoes at

Ailey's West 55th Street studios.

"This job is so much fun," Chaya tells *The Post*. "I thought other people should have experience with it."

He's not going quietly. The Ailey company is performing a tribute to him Sunday at City Center, followed by what his adoring colleagues expect will be one helluva party. "Chaya puts together his evenings," says Judith Jamison, Ailey's artistic director emerita. "He's a detail person, and his work ethic is ridiculous!"

Chaya remembers coming to America as if it were yesterday. He and his friends had just seen the gritty film "Midnight Cowboy," with its beaten-down hustlers, and they were afraid for him. "You're going to live like that?" they cried. But Chaya was confident. Though new to the art of tipping ("The waiter brought me a menu, I tip; he brought water, I tip"), he rented a room on the Upper West Side, took lessons at Luigi's Jazz Dance Centre and danced poolside at the Sheraton Hotel. Down to his last \$40, he cleaned houses before landing a place in Richard Englund's Dance Repertory Company.

When he acted as a translator for his dancer friend, Michihiko Oka, at an Ailey callback, the company's general manager recognized Chaya's name: Dance critic Clive Barnes had just singled him out for praise in the *New York Times*. Both dancers joined the company that week.

The pay was scant, but the travel plentiful. Chaya bought a map and stuck pins in

every city he visited, until it bristled like a porcupine. In 1977, the troupe came to Japan, and his widowed mom finally saw him dance onstage. Chaya asked her what she thought.

"Oh, the company is beautiful!" she cried. "What about me?" he asked. She explained that she never saw him — every time he came onstage, she covered her eyes and prayed, "Please don't fall, please don't fall..."

By the mid-'80s, he felt he'd peaked. He thought of returning to Japan to teach, but Ailey wouldn't let him go. Instead, he had Chaya assist the rehearsal director, helping other dancers with their moves. "I think he saw me doing this job," Chaya says. Indeed, his City Center dressing room, bare of everything but that night's program, a live orchid and a juicer, belonged to the late Ailey.

"It's so funny," Chaya says of being one of the few Asian dancers in a predominantly African-American company. "Mr. Ailey never

made me feel I was different."

As far as Jamison, 76, is concerned, Chaya is with the company for life.

"There are very few of us left who worked with Mr. Ailey," she tells *The Post*. "So we remain connected, heart and soul. Period."

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs through Jan. 5 at City Center; AlvinAiley.org



Photo courtesy of Ailey

Masazumi Chaya (left, and above with Alvin Ailey) rose from dancer to associate artistic director, staying true to Ailey's founding vision.