

# The New York Times

## The Man Behind the Dances

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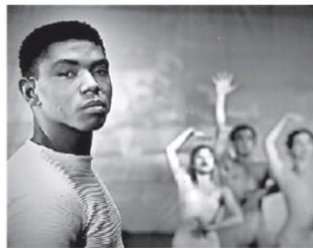
# The Man Behind the Dances

Jamila Wignot's documentary explores the life of Alvin Ailey.

TOO OFTEN, the idea of Alvin Ailey is reduced to a single dance: "Revelations." His 1960 exploration of the Black experience remains a masterpiece, but it also overshadows the person who made it. How can an artist grow after such early success? Who was Alvin Ailey the man?

In "Ailey," the director Jamila Wignot layers images, video and — most important — voice-overs from Ailey to create a portrait that feels as poetic and nuanced as choreography itself. Black-and-white footage of crowds filing into church, children playing, dance parties, and the dusty landscape of Texas (his birthplace) builds an atmosphere. Like Ailey's dances, the documentary leaves you swimming in sensation.

Ailey's story is told alongside the creation of "Lazarus," a new dance by the contemporary choreographer Rennie Harris, whose homage to Ailey proposes an intriguing juxtaposition of past and present. In his search to reveal the man behind the legacy, Harris lands on the theme of resurrection. Ailey died in 1989, but his spirit lives on in his dancers.



Top from left: Myrna White, Minnie Marshall and Ella Thompson Moore in "Revelations" in 1961, as seen in "Ailey." Above, the choreographer Alvin Ailey in the film.

But his early days weren't easy. Born in 1931, Ailey never knew his father and recalls "being glued to my mother's hip. Slushing through the terrain. Branches slashing against a child's body. Going from one place to another. Looking for a place to be. My mother off working in the fields. I used to pick cotton."

He was only 4. Ailey spoke about how his

**Ailey**  
Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 22 minutes. In theaters.

dances were full of "dark deep things, beautiful things inside me that I'd always been trying to get out."

All the while, Ailey, who was gay, remained intensely private. Here, we grasp his anguish, especially after the sudden death of his friend, the choreographer and dancer Joyce Trisler. In her honor, he choreographed "Memoria" (1979), a dance of loneliness and celebration. "I couldn't cry until I saw this piece," he says.

Ailey's mental health was fragile toward the end of his life; Wignot shows crowds converging on sidewalks, but instead of having them walk normally, she reverses their steps. He was suffering from AIDS. Before his death, he passed on his company to Judith Jamison, who sums up his magnetic, enduring presence: "Alvin breathed in and never breathed out."

Again, it's that idea of resurrection. "We are his breath out," she continues. "So that's what we're floating on, that's what we're living on."

**"A HYPNOTIC, IMMERSIVE PORTRAIT OF THE VISIONARY CHOREOGRAPHER."**  
— *Rolling Stone*

**"REVERENT AND GALVANIZING. PULSES WITH JOYFUL EXPRESSIVENESS."**  
— *Rolling Stone*

**"LEAVES YOU SWIMMING IN SENSATION."**  
— *The New York Times*

**"A TESTAMENT TO THE LIFE-CHANGING POWER OF REPRESENTATION."**  
— *The Wrap*

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