Film looks at what made Mr. Ailey Mr. Ailey

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July 25, 2021

The documentary “Ailey” opensnatio wide screens Aug. 6, is a long-overdue portrait of the modern dance pioneer.

Alvin Ailey died in 1989 at age 56, but, significantly, much of the legend that surrounds Ailey-it’s as though Ailey never really left him. His company has always evolved to meet the times.

At the time, Harris had been commissioned “out of the blue” by Robert Battle, artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, to create a short work about Ailey for the 50th anniversary of the company, founded in 1958. We saw him forming intently in a screening room, matching and rewatching archival footage of Ailey, as he worked to create what would become “Lualala.”

“I just sat there and watched,” Harris says. “to find out what made Mr. Ailey Mr. Ailey.”

But Ailey’s artistic legacy is more than the sum of the dancers he created, soaring though they were. It derived from his early childhood in the South, his years during the Depression, growing up Black in small-town Texas without a father, picking cotton with his mother when he was just 5 years old, sometimes going hungry.

“I mean, if you were Black, you were nothing,” Ailey says in a segment of a rarely heard audio interview with journalist P. J. O’Rourke that was recorded over 30 hours shortly before the choreographer died. “I remember seeing my mother on her knees scrubbing those white folks’ rooms and houses.”

Listening to his recollections, paired with moody and evocative archival footage of the Deep South, it’s clear that Ailey was destined to dance. It’s as though dance was embedded in his DNA. When he describes his rural childhood, it’s in terms of movement and the placement of bodies in space. He speaks of “people moving in the twilight,” “being glued to my mother’s hip,” slapping through the terrain, branches clasping against a dirty body. He’s looking for a place to be.

When Ailey was 12, his mother moved the family to Los Angeles to work in the aircraft industry and sent for him a few months later. As a teenager, he was drawn to dance and theater, although he never saw Black dancers or actors on stage—“no one to model myself after.”

Until he was 21, that is, and Katherine Dunham’s company came to town. Ailey was smacked.

“I couldn’t believe there were Black people on the legitimate stage,” he says. “I just took into another realm.”

And he remained in this mind until he died, sacrificing everything to dance, embracing a vision that was revolutionary for his time. Ailey created a racially diverse company with all bodies types to celebrate, honor and reflect Black traditions and experiences. He very consciously created dance not for the elite, but for “the man in the street.”

“Choreography was his cathexis,” says Sarita Allen, a former Ailey dancer and one of the dozen dancers, directors and choreographers who shared stories about Ailey, including Judith Jamison, chosen by Ailey as his successor before he died. Ristic, who took over in 2001, and guest choreographer Bill T. Jones. Ailey’s work also was lonely and demanding, occasionally leading him to dark and destructive places. He let few people in—literally. Even close friends never saw the inside of his apartment.

Though not a dancer himself, Wignot, the film’s director, is “a huge Ailey fan” who first saw the company perform in 1990 when she was a college student in Boston. So when Stephen Nye and Amanda Pollock of Imagine Films approached her about directing a film about Ailey’s life, she jumped at the opportunity.

At first, Wignot says, making a film about Ailey was just an idea, with a lot of unknowns. How much of him could be in the film? What material would be available to her? Who would tell the story? Most critically, how could she tell the story through Ailey’s eyes?”

“I wanted to know where this work emerged from, what experiences affected him,” she says. “I wanted to know what was feeding him, as an artist, and a person.”

Fortunately, the Ailey company made Bailey’s tapes available, and Wignot used them as a narrative device, as a sort of gritty audio equivalent of grainy footage, also accessing the work’s dialogue with the audience, with the audience itself. She also made use of interviews of artists who lived during Ailey’s time to understand his place in the world.

Given the enduring and iconic nature of Ailey’s work, the film was difficult to make. Some scenes that needed to be included in the film, such as the funeral of Alvin Ailey, were very difficult to arrange. In the end, the film is a testament to the power of dance and the impact of Alvin Ailey’s legacy. It is a powerful and moving portrait of one of the most important figures in modern dance.