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[‘Ailey’ Review: Peeking Behind the Curtain of a Choreographer’s Creative Mind](#)

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TELEVISION REVIEW | JOHN ANDERSON

A Peek Behind the Curtain Of a Creative Mind

The problem with being Alvin Ailey was being Alvin Ailey. “Sometimes your name becomes bigger than yourself,” says the dancer-choreographer Carmen de Lavallade of her late friend and colleague. “Alvin Ailey: Do you really know who that is, or *what* that is?” Jamila Wignot’s moving and poetic documentary portrait, “Ailey,” provides answers, while making clear that its subject had the same questions.

Ailey, who grew up dirt poor in Texas, the son of a nomadic single mother, became not only one of the more significant choreographers of the 20th century but a man synonymous with Black dance in America. “Did they love him, or what he represented?” asks the dancer-choreographer Bill T. Jones, echoing several of the Ailey friends and company members who appear throughout, including Judith Jamison, George Faison and Masazumi Chaya. Mr. Jones speculates that his onetime collaborator suffered the “demon” that often torments those who rise from humble origins to great heights. “If I’ve got-

ten this far,” he says, rhetorically, “I must have pulled one over on somebody. And any day now, I may be found out.”

Mr. Jones is probably the most eloquent and insightful of an unflinchingly cogent group of interviewees who populate Ms. Wignot’s film, which provides history, anecdotes and analysis about Ailey and as an “American Masters” presentation seems long overdue. Like most shows in the series, it is a tribute; unlike most, it is a gloriously expressionistic treatment of its subject. (Last summer’s program about bluesman Buddy Guy took a similarly adventurous tack; perhaps it’s a trend.) Ms. Wignot uses archival film in fluidly kinetic ways, deferring to Ailey’s own words when she can—“Ailey” contains a trove of audio interviews that she marries to footage that is often chosen not necessarily for its historical relevance but for its energy. The New York of the late ‘50s, when her subject founded the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, through the late ‘80s, when Ailey died of complications related to AIDS, is evoked in a



Dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey (foreground) in a production of ‘Blues Suite’

torrent of images that pay their own kind of homage to the palette of movement with which Ailey created his landmark dances, as well as the times he lived through. It also reflects the turmoil Ailey suffered—mentally, medically and in

terms of his fame and place in Black culture.

The technology is available that can make sound and picture look brand new, even if it’s a half-century old—see the Beatles on Disney+. But Ms. Wignot has deliber-

ately maintained the antique quality of much of her materials, including scratchy interviews and melty images, which not only provides ambience but helps differentiate between eras. This is particularly useful during the sequences that book-end the Ailey portrait—and occasionally interrupt it—and involve the creation of a work commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Ailey company (which took place in 2018). Robert Battle, the artistic director of the troupe, invited choreographer Rennie Harris (of the Puremovement company) to create such a work, and at the beginning of “Ailey” Mr. Harris is introduced to the young Ailey performers—through whom the new work will develop and evolve throughout the film. “We’re gonna create whatever this is,”

Mr. Harris jokes to laughs from the dancers. “It’s gotta be good.” It is. And like “Ailey” itself, seems worthy of its subject.

Ailey
Tuesday, 9 p.m., PBS