

# Intertwining the Past, Present, and Diaspora Through Dance

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Sitting in New York City's Lincoln Center Theater, two beautiful black bodies emerge in the spotlight making leaps, turns, gyrations, and kicks so effortlessly by themselves and intertwined with each other. The music is just as infectious as the movements and more dancers appear, instinctually telling the story of the diaspora.

This unique dance experience of modern, classical, ballet, jazz, and hip hop-infused choreography is performed worldwide by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Ailey II. Founded by Alvin Ailey himself in 1958, his goal was to show humanity in his work. Today, his African-American southern roots—that naturally incorporate movements from Africa and the Caribbean—have been seen by over 25 million people in almost 60 years.

Ailey II, founded in 1974 as an extension of Ailey's vision, gives the next generation of young talented dancers the opportunity to train, travel, and perform. As one of the first students hand-picked to be apart of Ailey II and now artistic director, Troy Powell has seen the transition of modern dance over the years. As hip hop, technology, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and Black Lives Matter have all transpired, the significance of the dance company has become essential to showcasing humanity for people of color.

Applause Africa had the opportunity to talk to Powell about his time with Alvin Ailey, how he keeps the legacy going, and why millennials should see the show.

## **How did you get your start at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater?**

Mr. Ailey was all about educating the next generation. He created a program where kids in the community could come and dance. I was hand-picked at the age of 9 to join that program. After that I got a scholarship to the Ailey school and his program in the junior division. In the professional division, I became a member of Ailey II then the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. I've been here for quite some time and my experience here has been nothing less than a blessing.

## **What makes Alvin Ailey different from other dance companies out there?**

The legacy. Ailey's vision speaks volumes. Everyone can relate to a dream or idea, and the fact that he had this idea to start an organization that celebrates the African-American heritage in a modern dance tradition. I think it is very special, unique, and different because it has been a true testament. People have been following and supporting for almost 60 years. The beauty of it is the vision and it comes out through the dancers when they perform.

## **Can you talk about the influence of the diaspora that helped create and shape great choreography for performances?**

Ailey loved all types of music from jazz, blues, African, and classical. If he was alive today, he'd definitely be into hip hop and pop as well. His southern roots from Rogers, TX and African rhythms had a huge affect on his movements and a lot of the music he uses. He never stepped away from his culture and African history and experience. Not only that he exposed so many people to it.

## **As the artistic director what do you pull from for inspiration?**

I'm inspired by the dancers. I always encourage the dancers. The way Mr. Ailey encouraged me to be a vision and legacy is to know you're a human being first, then a dancer. Keeping his legacy is also a culmination of what's going on in the world today.

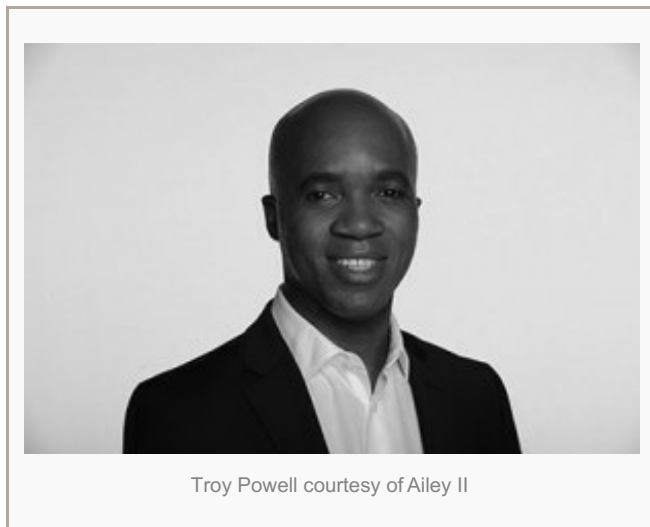
They are totally two different entities, but I try to combine them both. You have a new generation of dancers that listen to pop music and technology is in their face. Then you have the dance that was live and in your face in the past that you could only see at the theater as opposed to looking it up on Youtube or Vimeo. It's an interesting contrast, but also a great combination.

## **What's your vision when you're putting together a show?**

The first thing I need is a positive yet challenging environment for the dancers. When a young choreographer comes in to work with the dancers its more of a collaboration, and they're all one. When they're all in the room, they're creating. That's what I want it to be, like a big round table discussion through movement. The choreographer coming across as a human being to the dancers and challenging them in ways they've never been challenged before.

The dancers collaborate with the choreographer who's collaborating with the dancers and the music. The choreographer is learning more about the dancers than the dance and the dancers are learning more about the choreographer than the choreography.

## **How do Ailey dancers use this art form to address social issues like the Civil Rights movement and now, Black Lives Matter?**



I think that's why I love doing what I do because it is my responsibility. I am in the middle of both generations to encourage young dancers to inspire in the most honest way possible. Not try to emulate or be someone or something else. Today, it's all [about] technology and [for] this generation of dancers it may not be about going to a theater and being educated in that way. Even with hip hop, it was never considered concert dance. It was commercial on videos and television, and now it is making a change over. Now [we are] combining the two and bringing it to Ailey II and seeing how beautiful it looks on a concert stage.

### **What is the response when you travel the world?**

We get a great response when we go to Europe, it's like they've never seen anything like it. I love it because with Ailey II you have these young African-American artists who are defying the stereotype of being from the street. Like with Black Lives Matter, young men are being shot and killed on the street for no reason, and here we are showcasing that we are doing something positive with our lives. At the same time, we are telling our story in the most artistic and articulate way to the audience.

### **You also draw in students internationally, why are they interested in dancing for Ailey?**

The whole production. When you watch an Ailey performance you become a part of the performance. You can relate to what's going on on the stage. That relationship and connection we have with audiences. We love being who we are. They want to be a part of that.

### **What was it like performing in South Africa during your career as a dancer?**

It was more of an honor to be able to perform there than for them to see us perform. Coming as an African-American company with such prestige, professionalism, and a story, they absolutely loved it which made us love it. It was rejuvenating.

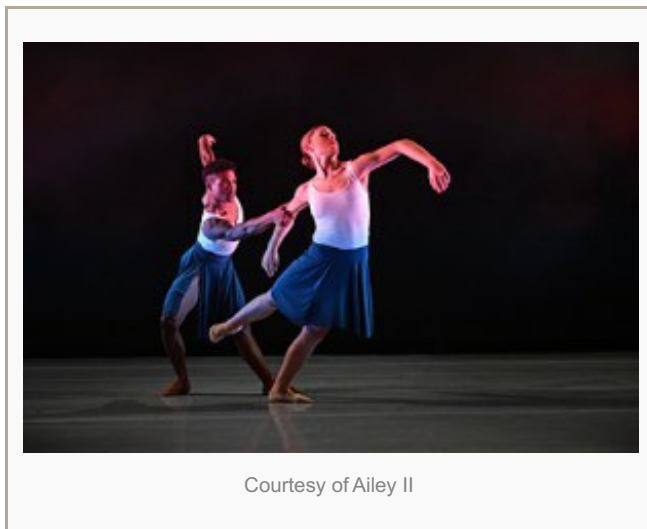
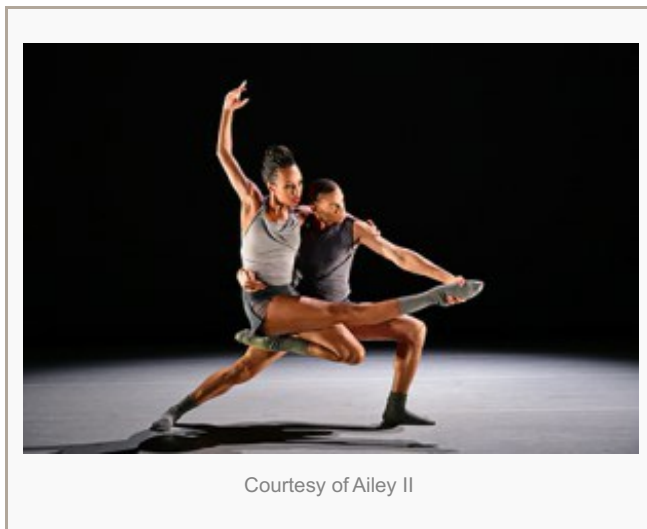
### **Why should millennials come and see Ailey?**

They should come because it has history. It's part of our American history just like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Alvin Ailey is part of that. Even if you're not a dancer, you should know this is history because one day you'll be teaching it to the next generation.

### **What's one of your favorite stories about Alvin Ailey?**

Oh, I have so many! I had the chance to work with him for the first time at the age of 15. The most memorable moment was when he sat us all down and asked us, "Where do you see yourself in 5 to 10 years?" I always think about this because I'm sitting in this chair today as art director of Ailey II.

Back then I never would've thought this would've happened. Of course, I wanted to dance and with his company, but not knowing if those things would happen. Knowing now why he asked those questions, I realize he was so ahead of his time. He knew what he had planned for his dancers. He had more of a one-on-one relationship with us as his students and really got to know us. He'd give lectures and talk to us about his company. He really served as a



father figure.