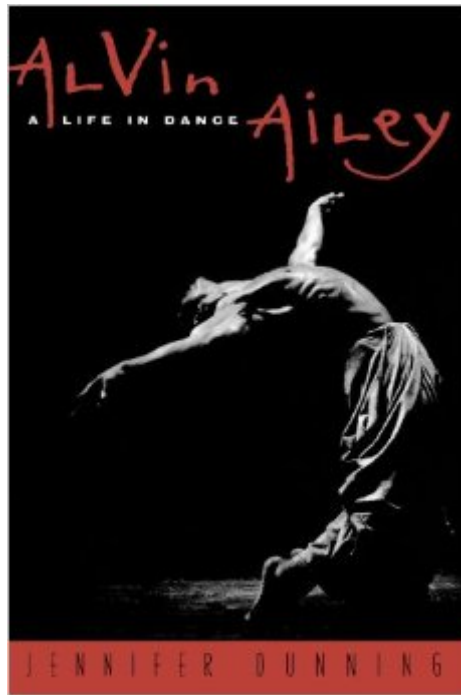


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Alvin Ailey: A Life In Dance



Synopsis

Alvin Ailey (1931–1989) was a choreographic giant in the modern dance world and a champion of African-American talent and culture. His interracial Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater provided opportunities to black dancers and choreographers when no one else would. His acclaimed *Revelations* remains one of the most performed modern dance pieces in the twentieth century. But he led a tortured life, filled with insecurity and self-loathing. Raised in poverty in rural Texas by his single mother, he managed to find success early in his career, but by the 1970s his creativity had waned. He turned to drugs, alcohol, and gay bars and suffered a nervous breakdown in 1980. He was secretive about his private life, including his homosexuality, and, unbeknownst to most at the time, died from AIDS-related complications at age 58. Now, for the first time, the complete story of Ailey's life and work is revealed in this biography. Based on his personal journals and hundreds of interviews with those who knew him, including Mikhail Baryshnikov, Judith Jamison, Lena Horne, Katherine Dunham, Sidney Poitier, and Dustin Hoffman, Alvin Ailey is a moving story of a man who wove his life and culture into his dance.

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Customer Reviews

This is a thorough, often riveting and eminently readable book about a trailblazer of American dance. A lively, affectionate and intimate portrait of this in every respect strongly gifted man who created the American Dance Theater. The dance critic and reporter of the New York Times, Jennifer Dunning has written a compelling book about this multifarious figure who wrote by himself a full chapter of American cultural history. For the first time, the life and work of Alvin Ailey, one of the

most beloved figures in modern dance, is entertainingly told, taking into account the often adverse personal and social circumstances he had to contend with for the 58 years of his life. When Alvin was born in Southeast Texas in 1931, public facilities were segregated, white children went to school and black children picked cotton. Yet he managed to overcome these social handicaps because "he was tremendously bright-terribly intelligent-intuitive-sharp". He was not ill at ease physically either: "beautiful, strong, wonderful smile with a perfect body and with the technique of dance well welded into his system". Homosexuality did not simplify his life, as were episodes of manic depression and substance abuse. Alvin Ailey was a splendid artist, and his unique merits and talents are all the more appreciable because he had constantly to wrestle with a lot of heavy burdens, even when they were often self-inflicted. A doctoral thesis was written as early as 1973 about the life and works of this creator of the highest caliber, but we had to wait till now to have this enjoyable, splendidly written, sumptuously printed and well-illustrated book. I recommend strongly this "Life in Dance". Jan Mortelmans.

I had the unique pleasure of being awarded a dance scholarship to the Ailey School when it was located in the Minskoff Theater Building on 44th st and Broadway in New York. This was back in the early 1980's. This training has stayed with me until this day, almost 25 years later. Alvin Ailey would drop by the classes from time to time to see what was going on with the students. Unpretentious and down to earth, he was a sight to behold. This book brought those memories back to me in vivid detail. Mr. Ailey has his demons for sure. His vision of a multi-racial dance company, which performed to not only the music and interpretations of Mr. Ailey's experience of being an African American gay male in this country, yet also the experience of what it meant to be truly human; warts and all. In the words of William Shakespeare, taken from the play MacBeth, "Heaven rest him now". Bravo, Alvin Ailey.

Jennifer Dunning has written a stunning portrait of Ailey in this not-so-little book. And who better to write it than the master reviewer of the New York Times herself? There's not stone left unturned here, and Dunning presents even the basest part of Ailey's life in a palatable way. She doesn't shy away from his sexual escapades or his grimacing-making comments, yet he's not presented as some wacked-out artist. Those familiar with Ailey's works will want to read this book, if you haven't already, and those not familiar will find it a good place to start. Ailey's works are some of the most powerful in the dance canon, and Dunning's work is one of the most powerful in the literary one. I'd give this ten stars if I could. One problem: you won't be able to put this down, that's how good it is,

so make plenty of time for reading.

Bought as a gift for a trained ballet dancer who worships Alvin Ailey. She was quite disappointed with the poor writing, and unfortunately put the book down before finishing.

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