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Candidate session number

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Examination session (May or November)

May

Year

2012

Diploma Programme subject in which this extended essay is registered: Dance

(For an extended essay in the area of languages, state the language and whether it is group 1 or group 2.)

Title of the extended essay: The Impact of Alvin Ailey's
Childhood, Adulthood, and African American
Culture on His Choreography**Candidate's declaration**

This declaration must be signed by the candidate; otherwise a grade may not be issued.

The extended essay I am submitting is my own work (apart from guidance allowed by the International Baccalaureate).

I have acknowledged each use of the words, graphics or ideas of another person, whether written, oral or visual.

I am aware that the word limit for all extended essays is 4000 words and that examiners are not required to read beyond this limit.

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Please comment, as appropriate, on the candidate's performance, the context in which the candidate undertook the research for the extended essay, any difficulties encountered and how these were overcome (see page 13 of the extended essay guide). The concluding interview (viva voce) may provide useful information. These comments can help the examiner award a level for criterion K (holistic judgment). Do not comment on any adverse personal circumstances that may have affected the candidate. If the amount of time spent with the candidate was zero, you must explain this, in particular how it was then possible to authenticate the essay as the candidate's own work. You may attach an additional sheet if there is insufficient space here.

[redacted] approached me in Sept. with the idea for her extended essay. We talked through her idea and I gave her some information I had on the subject to help her get started. Beyond that point [redacted] took the topic and ran with it. [redacted] took me a rough draft of her essay for review. Once I reviewed it we went over my recommendations together. When I reviewed [redacted] final draft [redacted] final draft for but some issues had not been addressed.

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To the best of my knowledge, the extended essay is the authentic work of the candidate.

I spent hours with the candidate discussing the progress of the extended essay.

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Assessment form (for examiner use only)

Candidate session number

Achievement level

Criteria	Examiner 1	maximum	Examiner 2	maximum	Examiner 3
A research question	2 ✓	2		2	
B introduction	1 ✓	2		2	
C investigation	3 ✓	4		4	
D knowledge and understanding	3 ✓	4		4	
E reasoned argument	2 ✓	4		4	
F analysis and evaluation	2 ✓	4		4	
G use of subject language	3 ✓	4		4	
H conclusion	2 ✓	2		2	
I formal presentation	2 ✓	4		4	
J abstract	1 ✓	2		2	
K holistic judgment	3 ✓	4		4	
Total out of 36	24 ✓				

Name of examiner 1: _____ (CAPITAL letters) Examiner number: _____

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Name of examiner 3: _____ (CAPITAL letters) Examiner number: _____

IB Cardiff use only: B: 1

IB Cardiff use only: A: 10560 Date: 15/5

The Impact of Alvin Ailey's Childhood, Adulthood, and African American Culture on
His Choreography

5/6/2012

Total Word Count: 3,294

Session Number:

Abstract

This research paper examines how the environment of Alvin Ailey affected his style of choreography and the life of modern dance. His childhood and adulthood was spent in the midst of the civil rights movement therefore it can be said that Alvin Ailey was not born a dancer. At first, Ailey did not enjoy dance, but with appreciation to his friends and his training, he became one of the most well known African American dancers. By analyzing some of his works, we are able to see the affects that his life had on him. Due to the word limit and the large number of choreographies he created, only a small portion of his works will be studied. Life and society were the main inspirations to majority of his dances.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Introduction	5
<i>Cry</i>	6
Life in Los Angeles	7
Lester Horton Studio	8
<i>Memoria</i>	8
<i>Love Songs</i>	9
<i>Revelations</i>	9
<i>Jamaica</i>	10
<i>The River</i>	11
<i>Pas de "Duke"</i>	12
<i>Hermit Songs</i>	12
<i>Survivors</i>	12

<i>Flowers</i>	12
<i>Hidden Rites</i>	13
Conclusion	15
References	16

Introduction

Each artist must create "his own unity according to his own experience and belief" (Dunning 70). Alvin Ailey was born on January 5, 1931. The artistic mind of Alvin Ailey began its development long after birth. Just like any other pioneer through life, obstacles were placed to hinder and defer his dreams. But, Alvin Ailey's obstacles were somewhat different from others. His constant moving from city to city drew him closer to his mother. His mother always tried to keep a decent lifestyle for her and Alvin although there were little job opportunities for blacks during that time. Alvin also did everything he could to help his mother.. During that time blacks were kept from striving due to the restrictions forced upon them by the white society. Although there were still segregation laws, blacks still managed to live in peace as much as racism and poverty would allow.

Word Count: 147

Alvin's mother, Lula Elizabeth Cliff, always carried Alvin in her arms. Ironically, Alvin was reluctant to walk on his own. One day she placed him on the ground and he instantly began spinning around. He also made two or three flips. For the first year and a half of his life, she thought he could not walk. Surprisingly, he said that she never gave him a chance. Alvin's mother described Alvin as being a little bossy. The two had a very close bond. They told jokes, read books together, and retold stories to each other. Alvin's favorite pastime was picking bouquets of wildflowers and weeds for his mother. Alvin and his mother traveled to many cities to live a better lifestyle. When Alvin started his own company, he choreographed *Cry*. *Cry* was a gift to his mother and to black women everywhere. Created in only five days, he wanted the dance "to say something about the huge influence that black women have had in my life" (DeFrantz 182). It was first performed by Judith Jamison who portrayed every woman figure's life, work, and spiritual rebirth. Jamison acted as the dancing body and represented the experience of living black in America. The first part of the dance shows the changing of identity. Then, the second and third part shows a transfer from great sorrow to overjoyed faith. Jamison's body was an extraordinary picture of strength and flexibility.

In the summer of 1936, Alvin's mother changed Alvin's life. Alvin's mother saw an advertisement in a local newspaper seeking help in preparing meals for a highway crew in a larger town. She placed Alvin under her sister's guardianship and left. Little did she know, after she left Alvin left his aunt's house to stay with another aunt where he began to experiment sexually with other children. But Alvin always felt like an outsider and a loner. He knew he was loved but never understood. In school, Alvin was always in the rapture of trouble with other students. When the students were in trouble, you could always find Alvin included. However, Alvin was smart and made good grades. While in school, Alvin did not dance. But during late night parties, he would spy on other children dancing to the jukebox. He described it as, "an atmosphere of sensuality always accompanied by a fear or a sense of impending trouble" (Dunning 17).

Alvin and his mother journeyed to Los Angeles in search for a better job and environment than Texas. The 1930s flourished with blacks causing an increase in racial discrimination and tension between blacks and whites. The black community was established in the south-central section of the Los Angeles, where Alvin and his mother lived. Alvin's mother enrolled him in the nearby school George Washington Carver Junior High School. Alvin began to open up and take in the world. He remained on the honor roll and for three years he achieved the award of perfect attendance. Alvin spent hours in the school reading and writing.

His first taste of dance was tap. This brief period in his life was nothing compared to exciting Central Avenue. Alvin spent Saturdays in movie houses and watched top black vaudeville acts. He would come home to exclaim what he had seen to his mother. He was infatuated by the dancers. Perhaps his favorite dancer was Gene Kelly. He remembered him as "a man who wore a shirt, pants, and a tie and danced like a man" (Dunning 26). His Saturdays were either split between Central Avenue, the Orpheum, and the Biltmore Theatres downtown. His visits to the Orpheum were filled with music by the best bands. He has also listened to the great Duke Ellington and his musicians. His experience at the Biltmore changed his life forever.

The Biltmore showcased black dancers. Alvin had never seen black dancers. A black dancer by the name of Katherine Dunham caught the eye of young Alvin. She was an anthropologist, a performer, and choreographer. The women dancers were beautiful and the men were big. Alvin on the other hand was rugged, handsome, and looked like a quarterback. Alvin began a friendship with Ted Crumbs, a boy in his neighborhood who had a passion for dance. Ted would show Alvin dance combinations and Alvin would ask questions. Sometimes, Ted would teach Alvin. Both loved the work of Dunham and decided to take a class given by her and her company. Alvin didn't enjoy the class. The smell was sour and there was not a real dance floor. Alvin lasted one class. Alvin was interested in dance but it took a student at

his school, Carmen de Lavallade, to fully engulf him. Alvin's eyes were opened by her beauty and grace. His interest in dance was now shining brighter than before. It was when he visited Melrose Avenue in Hollywood and saw dancers of the Horton studio that he knew that he wanted to pursue dance.

Lester Horton's studio was established in Los Angeles. Horton was a people person. His studio atmosphere was freewheeling coupled with artistry. He pushed his dancers to the edge, forcing them to embrace artistic self-knowledge. Their dances were vulgar and flimsy. His dances were influenced by other cultures. Horton and his dancers (or "kidlets" as he called them) studied their city and the many cultures it contained. Alvin's dance family was very hardworking and energetic. Alvin started out in the beginners' classes. He became close friends with Joyce Trisler. She started her own dance company when she became older also. When she died, it hit Ailey very hard. He choreographed *Memoria* as his memory of Trisler. Ailey wanted to show "the joy...the beauty...the creativity...and the wild spirit of my friend Joyce Trisler" (DeFrantz 205). His memories of her were intangible. He wanted to make the dance difficult to understand, but the audience seemed to have understood the meaning. He struggled to make the dance deep in meaning.

While at the Lester studio, he drew attention from the very start, but college life at UCLA was consuming much of his attention. Horton asked him if he was interested in becoming a good dancer and Alvin replied yes. Alvin was given the opportunity of a scholarship if he would work as a handyman in the theatre. His school life at UCLA lasted only one semester because of the stressful life of academics, dance, and work.

The Horton studio was open to homosexuality but it was never discussed. To the members at the Horton studio, it seemed as a way of life, including Horton. Horton suffered a painful year in 1949. His partner William Browne left him after seventeen years. Browne was also a member of the Horton studio. Alvin seemed to have known that he was homosexual as he had relations with a student at UCLA

named David McReynolds. Alvin told McReynolds that, "in dance you hold men so much it's very difficult not to get physically involved" (Dunning 56). Later recognized as a choreographer, Alvin created *Love Songs*. *Love Songs* is about a man who takes us through his painful time of losing his male friend. This performance has been seen as a romantic relationship between two males. Although there is no homoerotic dancing, it stood as a voice to other gay black men who often did not discuss their sexuality. Previously stated, Ailey was attracted to the same sex. As a young child, he was ashamed to say that he was attracted to boys. As a man, he had many relationships with men but his friends felt as if his partners took advantage of his kindness.

The key to Horton's choreography was to explore, explore by moving. But the goal was also to express emotions through stillness. Alvin mastered this goal. Alvin felt as if Horton's choreography suited him. But he never thought he was good enough. He didn't study long with Horton and returned home because of money issues. But he continued to dance. Unbelievably, Horton died of a massive heart attack. Alvin, along with Frank Eng, knew it was up to them to keep the Horton studio running. Ailey returned to Los Angeles to teach and manage the studio. Alvin kept pages after pages of Horton's techniques and incorporated them into choreography and performances. Each day that passed, Alvin became more and more confident as a teacher. Unfortunately, as Alvin was starting to embrace the Horton technique, he was contacted to perform on Broadway as a featured dancer. He accepted and never returned to the Horton studio. Soon, the Horton studio became bankrupt. The studio fought to keep its doors open, but was not successful. Six years after Alvin left, the Horton studio closed.

Alvin was excited as he arrived in New York. But turmoil was in the air. Alvin met the rise of the civil rights movement upon his arrival. Black dancers were told that they were not being used, especially in classical ballet and were told that they didn't have the correct physique for ballet and modern dance. Ailey created *Revelations* to represent the strength and faith of African Americans as they fight

for sociopolitical equality. It also represents the “cultural memory as body wisdom, a synthesis of religious/folk song, formal technique, and social stance arranged as a series of tasks that could be performed by shifting rosters of dancers” (DeFrantz 91). He used his memories of his rural Baptist Church, paintings by Brueghel, and writings by Langston Hughes and James Baldwin. *Revelations* stood as a classically shaped exploration of American dance expressions for the concert stage. Ailey intended *Revelations* to balance his company’s Negro heritage and deliver contemporary African American life. The 1969 version of *Revelations* recognized a mythologized African American history. After *Revelations*, it was clear: Ailey’s performances illustrated a variety of representations for dancing black bodies on the concert stage. Thanks to his company and *Revelations*, a standard for African American concert dance performances was created. By 1975, *Revelations* was identified as an accomplishment for African Americans in the performing arts.

Alvin began to attend meetings dedicated to segregating the performing arts. After spending some time in New York, Alvin was beginning to feel a need to choreograph his own dances. Many dances were performed at the Ninety-second Street Y theatre. If you performed there, your dance life was bound for success. Ailey saw dancers in the Broadway musical of *Jamaica* that he wanted to cast in his choreography. He held his first performance called *Blues Suite* at the Y along with his friend. *Blues Suite* was his first choreographed piece. *Blues Suite* was choreographed to show the audience southern musicality. The women performed as hookers and the men performed as their patrons. In *Blues Suite*, the blues defined the brief liberation from social discrimination that African Americans underwent. Ailey connected the audience to the harsh reality by using loud and ostentatious blues dance styles. *Blues Suite* contained five stories called “I Cried”, “Mean Ole Frisco”, “House of the Rising Sun”, “Backwater Blues”, and “In the Evening.” “I Cried” is danced by a male solo and is a very mature member of the company. The dancer is able to perform in anguish, resulting in the public vulnerability and regret. Alvin Ailey had feelings for both men and women. The dance “Mean Ole Frisco” was about homosexuality but

Ailey avoids homosexuality actions on stage. The black male in this dance trying to pursue a woman, but his homosexual is obvious. "House of the Rising Sun" is performed by three women. The dance defines the misery of a hooker as she sits in her boudoir. "Backwater Blues" was choreographed as a brutal lovers' battle. The conflict between the man and woman becomes "a heavily encoded symbol of racial difference and racial distinctiveness." "In the Evening" is performed by three men getting ready to go to a barrellhouse (a cheap bar). The most significant part is at the end of the dance. At the end, the dancers seem as if they are happy, but they are not. The end indicated the harsh everyday life of labor and oppression. Throughout the performance, he used songs that he referred to as, "hymns to the secular regions of the soul" (Dunning 115). Little did he know, when he received his bill, it referred to him and his dancers as Alvin Ailey and Company. In that time, there were no dance "companies." This marked the beginning of Ailey's inspirational journey through dance. As Alvin became older, he better understood human interaction and himself. The following dances are examples of how Ailey interpreted what he felt about society during that time.

The River uses dancers to describe the flow of a river from a stream to an estuary. Ailey interprets the water metaphor as a facet of human coupling, with prominent gestures of awakening desire, courtship, jealousy, and living and providing continuity among its section. In the beginning of the dance, a male dancer represents a man who acts as a child being born and joining the water's flow. *The River* personified human interaction and the personality of desire. Each of these themes defined what Ailey was trying to do with his career, to open opportunities for black dancers and to show the audience African American prejudice and homosexuality. *The River* was choreographed to perform outside of their usual style. Ailey saw his interest in classical ballet grow. He stated, "As a result, I think that I, too, have been affected by the ballet people; my own company now has become more balletic because I believe so strongly in the ballet technique" (DeFrantz 155).

Pas de "Duke" was called "a meeting of two worlds." This piece was dedicated to the great Duke Ellington. Alvin Ailey joined Judith Jamison and Mikhail Baryshnikov to represent contrasts such as race, gender, nationality, background, and physicality. *Pas de "Duke"* was a breakthrough for Ailey because it was a mature showcase of his choreography in ballet, social and modern dance technique. The male and female dancers dance playfully to jazzy music. The dancers mirror one another, showing off their techniques and abilities.

Hermit Songs was prepared by Alvin Ailey as a solo for himself. Alvin is portrayed as a monk who faces his sinful acts of the past. He dances from his thoughts. It is said that *Hermit Songs* is a reflection of Alvin's life. London critic, Noel Goodwin watched this piece and wrote: "He is not showing a man of God but a man in relation to God and the result is most intriguing...The *Hermit* is possessed not by God but by His own vision of God" (Yartey, "Alvin Ailey, A Revolutionary in Dance"). The male soloist dances through his thoughts. *Hermit Songs* is a commemoration to manhood.

Survivors was the last choreography of Ailey. This work personified black Africans in the struggle of apartheid. This masterpiece was enthused by Nelson and Winnie Mandela. Survivorship and a march to freedom were exemplified in the performance. The choreography shows the separation of Winnie from Nelson by the use of jail bars. Through this dance, Ailey shows the anger and frustration that he holds for South Africa. Choreographer Mary Barnett exclaimed, "Part of the memory, the experience, is its physical headiness, its heat, its texture, its agony, its abstraction, its sound" (Bromberg, "Ailey Integrates Art, Anger in 'Survivors'").

Flowers was dedicated to rockers who influenced the youth through electric music. *Flowers* central focus was the life of Janis Joplin and her drug addiction. It describes the relationship between Joplin and the drug dealer. Throughout the dance, a male dancer who acts as the drug dealer controls the female dancer who portrays Joplin. He controls and manipulates her movements. He becomes her

support system by carrying her. His solo dance in the choreography is used to attract her to the drugs. *Flowers* acts as a window to celebrity and how it can result in despair, loneliness, and emotional and physical suicide.

Hidden Rites, or "battle of the sexes," is a dance that includes fight and seduction rituals between a man and woman. It shows how the biological and physical makeup of men and women can divide us and at the same time bring us together. The rituals are used to bring down spirits. Sometimes the woman leads the man and at other times they mirror one another. In this dance, as well as others, he used important modern dance movements that are still used today such as the Horton-inspired upper-body tilt toward the floor while balancing on one leg, the leg stretching upward to the side or back of the torso; a turn with arms held upward and to the sides in an angular, broken U-shape; and a turned-out arabesque line.

When Ailey was once asked what the retribution of his own life was, he responded, "This, Having a dancing company. That is the great struggle. That has been the challenge of 30 years. Keeping it all together is still the problem, the constant battle to afford the engagements, the designers, the choreographers, to pay the dancers a decent wage. You have to keep proving that you have a right to exist" (DeFrantz, 229). It certainly can be said that Alvin Ailey has done a remarkable job. After his passing on December 1, 1989, his company continued to strive. In fact, before 1992, his company made an unusually high earning for modern dance. Today, one question still arises: How did Ailey represent black dance? Well, Ailey tried to give his audience and outsiders an inside look of black life. Ailey's dance company was a success because it showed the world that the bodies of African Americans are beautiful, although they were looked upon as unappealing. He also proved that every feature of black culture could be performed to concert dance. Until this day, the company continues to evolve with the African American culture and continues to tell the story of life, struggles, and joy. Alvin Ailey also mastered

versioning. Versioning is the generation reworking of artistic ideals. His job was to be the orator to his dancers and his dancers had to tell the story with their bodies on stages.

Word Count: 3,022

Conclusion

In conclusion, the high level that Alvin Ailey set was not only for modern dance, but for all genres of dance. His goal was to break barriers and push the limits whites placed upon blacks and to show his audience what life was like for blacks. He wanted to reach ordinary people, not just dance admirers. Alvin and his dancers were able to liberate their emotions on the stage. "It's all in the childhood," he says, "trying to make things right, trying to make the great assimilation, trying to make people understand what it means to be pained, frustrated, angry." There is no question that Alvin Ailey not only revolutionized dance, but the world. His society and life was the background inspiration to his choreography.

Word Count: 125

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