



Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture

By Thomas F. DeFrantz

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In the early 1960s, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was a small, multi-racial company of dancers that performed the works of its founding choreographer and other emerging artists. By the late 1960s, the company had become a well-known African American artistic group closely tied to the Civil Rights struggle. In *Dancing Revelations*, Thomas DeFrantz chronicles the troupe's journey from a small modern dance company to one of the premier institutions of African American culture. He not only charts this rise to national and international renown, but also contextualizes this progress within the civil rights, women's rights, and gay rights struggles of the late 20th century.

DeFrantz examines the most celebrated Ailey dances, including *Revelations*, drawing on video recordings of Ailey's dances, published interviews, oral histories, and his own interviews with former Ailey company dancers. Through vivid descriptions and beautiful illustrations, DeFrantz reveals the relationship between Ailey's works and African American culture as a whole. He illuminates the dual achievement of Ailey as an artist and as an arts activist committed to developing an African American presence in dance. He also addresses concerns about how dance performance is documented, including issues around spectatorship and the display of sexuality, the relationship of Ailey's dances to civil rights activism, and the establishment and maintenance of a successful, large-scale Black Arts institution.

Throughout *Dancing Revelations*, DeFrantz illustrates how Ailey combined elements of African dance with motifs adapted from blues, jazz, and Broadway to choreograph his dances. By re-interpreting these tropes of black culture in his original and well-received dances, DeFrantz argues that Ailey played a significant role in defining the African American cultural canon in the twentieth century. As the first book to examine the cultural sources and cultural impact of Ailey's work, *Dancing Revelations* is an important contribution to modern dance history and criticism as well as African-American studies.



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Editorial Review

Review

"In *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture*, Thomas F. DeFrantz sets out to provide an appraisal of one of the most important figures in the short history of American modern dance, as well as a 'stabilizing narrative' of his work. The result is an impeccable piece of dance scholarship—one that achieves its objectives and affirms Ailey's contribution to the African-American cultural canon...Dance students, scholars, and Ailey enthusiasts will all value this groundbreaking study."--*Times Literary Supplement*

"*Dancing Revelations* is an enjoyable read, not only for those concerned with Ailey's dances as they relate to larger struggles within American society, but for anyone who loves the art and artist."--*Dance Magazine*

"DeFrantz's study...is not the first book about the protean Ailey, who was born in hardscrabble Texas in 1931 and died in 1989 after creating close to 80 works. But it is perhaps the most comprehensive, combining biography, criticism, the analysis of dance criticism, and a sort of corporate history, siting the now firmly established Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in the international cultural landscape."--*Village Voice*

About the Author

Thomas DeFrantz earned degrees from Yale, the City University of New York, and the Performance Studies Department of New York University. He organized the dance history program at the Ailey School, and is editor of *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*. His writings have appeared in the *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History*, and the *Village Voice*. Also a performer and choreographer, DeFrantz has taught at NYU and Stanford University. He is currently Associate Professor of Theater Arts at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

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