

Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey

Presents

AILEY II

Lecture Demonstration ~ October 20, 2009

School Performance ~ October 21 – 23, 2009

“Dance comes from the people and should be delivered back to the people.”

~ Alvin Ailey

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater made its debut at the 92nd Street YM-YWHA in New York City on March 30, 1958. Alvin Ailey became one of America’s foremost choreographers and dancers, a success built on his vision: to portray the human experience through dance and bring it to as many people as possible. Alvin Ailey sparked interest in dance throughout Kansas City and his works have helped build a community that celebrates the power of Ailey’s dance legacy while communicating the rich history of African-American culture. Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey has united people of all backgrounds who have become connected through our similarities in purpose, to share what we have in common, while we explore together the unique character of our individuality.

The critically acclaimed Ailey II company, under the direction of Sylvia Waters, will showcase its young talent in diverse works from the company’s repertory, including many of Alvin Ailey’s most celebrated works. The company will conduct informal lecture demonstrations at your school or a fully staged 50-minute performance

~~~Why Is a Live Theatre Audience Unique?~~~

(Courtesy of the Lied Center, Lawrence, Kansas)

Television, rock concerts, and live performing arts events are forms of entertainment that ask for different kinds of responses from audiences.

Television almost begs us to talk back to it, and most of us do. When others are watching with us, we also talk to them about what’s on the screen—and sometimes other things as well. We leave and re-enter the room. We watch and listen and talk and move around all at the same time.

Rock concerts insist that we join in the musical celebration by singing, clapping, shouting, and sometimes dancing. We also talk a lot about what we’re experiencing. We watch, listen, sing, talk, and dance all at the same time.

Theatre, classical music and dance performances, on the other hand, ask for something different. They request emotional and intellectual commitment that can come only from close attention. While we may laugh and applaud at appropriate times, we watch and listen quietly.

containing dance and narration at the historic Folly Theater. Lighting, costumes and appropriate scenic props will be included in the theater performance. After the performance, students are invited to participate in question-and-answer sessions with the dancers.

Elements of Dance and Critical Viewing

GENERAL OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS

We wish for students to:

- Receive a positive dance performance experience.
- Increase their knowledge of the arts and artists, and to develop skills of perception, reflection, interpretation, and communication.
- Collect knowledge before, during, and after the performance, aided by a teacher who freely adapts our study guide for his or her own use! Please adapt this guide to fit your needs.
- Connect the arts across the curriculum.

TEACHER REMINDERS

- **Teacher Guide.** We hope that teachers will photocopy pages in this guide as needed for all instructors to use with their students.
- **Preparation for Students.** Please remind students that they will be seeing a live performance.

There are good reasons why:

- Performing arts events take longer to unfold than 30-minute television programs; to appreciate them fully, it is necessary to be attentive to what the artists say and do.
- Members of the audience who are listening and watching closely are easily distracted by the sounds and movements of other audience members.
- Actors, musicians and dancers are in the same room as the audience and are therefore affected by audience behavior. Film and television performances are fixed on film and, as a result, are not affected by audience activity. Actors must move precisely, must time their lines and reactions carefully, and must make subtle adjustments on the basis of the moment. Musicians and dancers must remember complex musical passages or choreographed steps that require their careful attention. Unexpected activity can destroy their concentration.

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU COME TO THE FOLLY THEATER

Before the performance, an usher will meet you at the entrance to the theater and direct you to your seats. It is a good idea to use the restroom before the performance. If you must go to the restroom during the performance, be sure that you leave and return quietly. An adult (teacher or sponsor) **must** escort the student out of the theater and remain with the student at all times!

Once you are seated, observe the stage. Is the curtain (*Grand Drape*) down? If it is not, what mood do the colors and angles of the set create? How does the lighting affect the set? How does the lighting in the theatre affect the energy of the audience? It is important to soak up the atmosphere around you before the show begins. Soon the lights will dim or go out indicating that curtain time is near. At this time the audience becomes very quiet.

During the performance, the audience listens and watches very carefully. Performers like to hear you laugh when something is funny. Most of all, they love to hear you clap at the end of the performance when they bow. After the final bows (*curtain calls*), the audience always stays seated until the lights in the “house” (where you are sitting) come on. The usher and your teacher will give you directions for leaving the theater. After the performance, take time to discuss the dance performance you have seen. Share your thoughts with your teachers, family and friends! Write and let the dancers, choreographers, and designers know your thoughts about the performance. The Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey staff will be happy to forward your letters to the artists (we cannot guarantee, though, that they will have time to respond).

Things to *Think* about & Things to *Do* Before Going to the Performance

Lecture Demonstrations. A limited number of 50-minute lecture/demonstrations are available during the Ailey II Kansas City fall residency. The Artistic Director or Rehearsal Director narrates the presentation. Six young multi-cultural dancers will conduct warm-up exercises, common dance movements and excerpts from popular pieces of their repertory. The narration includes a brief history of the company and discussion of the commitment, discipline and hard work involved in becoming a professional dancer and how it relates to achievement of personal goals.

Before these dancers arrive in your school, review the differences between being an audience member for a film vs. a *live* performance, you should also let the students know what to expect. The dancers will not only be performing—they will talk to the students, encourage their participation, and answer questions.

Sometimes students are uncomfortable when dancers, especially men, appear in leotard and tights. Spend some time discussing what different professionals wear as *uniforms*. Corporate executives, doctors, nurses, policemen, firemen, ranchers, *etc.* each have a particular uniform for their job. Most students will have seen dancers at work—at least on TV or film. Discuss what they will expect the Ailey II Company Members to be wearing as a uniform.

To begin breaking down some prejudices or pre-conceived notions against dancers, introduce students to the parallels between dance and other sports. Locate pictures in magazines, in books, and on posters (or cereal boxes!) of athletes in “job positions”—a basketball player bending her/his knees in preparation for a free throw shot, a baseball player in his batting stance, a soccer player just after he has kicked the ball, an ice hockey player in a lunge, *etc.* Also find pictures of dancers in equally exciting, controlled movement. Discuss the professions of these men, their similarities and differences. Students are introduced to the idea that coordination can—and should—be taken seriously. Encourage students to try creating approximately what they saw taking place in the photographs. The athletic aspect of the pictures reinforces the idea that you can use your mind and body, working together, to express yourself non-verbally. Students interested in choreography could create a dance that incorporates one or more of these moves. Taking the football “place kick” off the playing field, for example, and setting it down in an artistic situation in the classroom.

Ailey Ambassadors. School Performance participants can have an Ailey Ambassador come to their school to speak to them about KCFAA, Alvin Ailey and how to view a modern dance performance. Ambassadors will bring an 18-minute videotape for students to view.

Dreams and Goals. Dance is about using movement, shape, color, texture, rhythm, and sounds to express ideas, attitudes, and feelings. Being a dancer is about commitment, discipline and hard work. Encourage students to share their personal goals and dreams. Have them create a statement like the opening sentence of this paragraph. For instance, if the dream is to become a professional soccer player, the statement would begin “Soccer is about...” This is not an easy task, but will help them clarify why they want to pursue their goal. Next, have students think about what these goals and dreams require in order to be fulfilled. All dreams require commitment, discipline and hard work, so students will need to brainstorm what kind of hard work they must do—*specific* details for their goals and dreams.

Movement Vocabulary. Moving with part or all of the body, everyone can: swing, stretch, bob, vibrate, *etc.* When a person’s body knows how to do these things, the body and mind have a “movement vocabulary”. Students will be able to recognize these movement qualities in the dances they see performed by Ailey II.

Use the following movements as preparation for anything from academic tests, to sports, to artistic performance. Warm-ups prepare the body for more vigorous and concentrated activity; they also provide a transition from a previous activity to a new one.

- *Stretching* is the extension of a part or all of the body as far as possible without strain.
- *Swinging* is a loose, relaxed movement that starts with energy, continues with momentum, and ends with energy. The free-flowing ease of the swing corresponds to the

breathing cycle of inhalation (energy), exhalation (momentum). Swing all parts of the body: torso, head, legs and arms.

- *Bobbing* is a gentle, easy, up-and-down movement, done with any part of the body in any position. To use the feet properly, land first on the toes, then on the ball of the foot, then the heel and finally, the knees should bend.
- *Striking* is a short, clearly defined movement done with as little tension as possible. The more relaxed you are, the easier this activity is. Striking is a percussive movement that helps use excess energy. Use all parts of the body.
- *Vibrating* is a shaking movement that resembles shivering. It is hard to do, and harder to sustain, but is very effective in ridding the body of strain and tension. Use various parts of the body as well as the total body.
- *Collapsing* may be partial or total, but in all cases, start slowly. In partial collapse, a good image is a balloon with the air being let out. To do a total collapse to the floor, keep the body rounded, and land only on “padded” parts of the body (*avoid falling on knees, elbows and wrists*).

Things to *Think* about & Things to *Do* After Seeing the Performance

Take a Movement Break! You do not need any special training, equipment (unless you want to include music) or space to arrange a movement break for your class. Work some of the following activities into the usually sedentary routines of a desk-bound academic program. The most important aspects of a movement program are its potential for strengthening a child’s self-esteem and for equipping him/her with a securer sense of self. Helping students discover some kind of harmony between their emotions and their physical being should be a key goal in education. **NOTE:** *A word about space. When students have been sitting at their desks working in a very controlled situation, and you offer a large, wide-open area, you will more than likely have chaos. Begin small, with a cleared area in the corner of the classroom or simply clear the area around each student’s desk.*

Halls and Walls. If you eventually want a space larger than the ordinary classroom, why not try the hallways? How many things can you do in a hallway without disrupting the entire school system? Try crawling up the walls, literally—with your fingers. You can also hold on to the wall to practice balances and gentle kicks, or knee bends. Then find a way to do push-ups against the wall.

Body Bingo. Use “flash cards” or call out directions for touching body parts with other body parts: nose to knee, chin to chest, ear to shoulder, elbow to knee, wrist to ear, chin to wrist, foot to leg, heel to heel, *etc.*

Move and Freeze. Encourage students to bring in their favorite music. The directions are simple: move when you hear music; freeze when the music stops. It’s also fun to have students make tapes of many different styles of music, different qualities of sound, different instruments, *etc.*

Mighty Movers. One theory about the word “muscle” is that it comes from a Greek expression meaning, “to enclose,” because layers of muscle enclose the body. There are more than six hundred muscle groups in the human body. The muscles that you can see on the body’s surface are called “landmarks”. You can find pictures that show these landmarks, such as the deltoids, triceps, biceps quadriceps, *etc.* Just like other athletes, dancers’ muscles are well defined.

Muscles make up about 40 percent of the weight of a man and about 30 percent of the weight of a woman. The *Blood and Guts* book [see *Resources*] lists two amazing facts:

- If all the muscles in the body could pull in one direction in one mighty heave, the force would equal 25 tons.
- The average person’s muscles do daily work amounting to loading 24,000 pounds onto a four-foot-high shelf. Thank about that over a lifetime.

Move and Remember. [*concentration, sequencing, physical memory*] Have each student make up three different “classroom-sized” movements that can be connected into a *combination*, or movement sequence. For example: both arms start stretched above the head; arms drop even with the shoulders (a “T”) with palms up, then both elbows bend and palms touch shoulders, elbows straighten back to “T” position. Working in partners, each student repeats his/her own combination while watching the other student repeat theirs. The challenge is to be able to concentrate and not “pick up” the partner’s combination. Do this several times with different partners. Next, combine into groups of four students. Have each student learn the other three combinations. Then, as a group, they put together all four combinations into one 12-count combination. (NOTE: Some of the movements may need to be altered slightly in order to connect to the next set of three.) Ask the group to rehearse their combination until they can do it without error. Finally, the group demonstrates their combination to the rest of the class and then they watch while the class tries to repeat their combination. The students in the performing group serve as “judges”. Was any student able to perform the combination with only one viewing?

Contour Drawing. Contour drawing means drawing only the outside edge of a thing—an outline. Students can quickly do a contour drawing of their hand; place one hand, with fingers spread apart, on a paper and draw around it. By questioning, you can help them discover that this drawing doesn’t show whether or not the person is wearing rings (at least not what kind) or where the knuckles, scars, wrinkles and lines come, or whether the hands are clean or dirty. A contour drawing only talks about edges, but it can be very useful. It speaks of shape, size, and sometimes spacing. Rembrandt made telling contour drawings. So do a number of cartoonists and commercial designers.

Have each student gather three to five objects between the size of an eraser and a pair of scissors. They can probably find them in their desks, pockets or book bags; or, several days before you do contour drawing, ask them to bring in some small objects like juice cans, bottle tops, shells, spools, toothbrushes. To reinforce the concept of contour, the

students will draw around these objects repeatedly, to create a design or pattern. It is most fun to use wrapping paper or butcher paper so they can draw long lines of shapes moving across the paper in a variety of ways.

Hieroglyphics. The first writing ever invented used pictures instead of words. The drawings used in “picture writing” are called **symbols**. Have students bring in signs, pictures, stickers and other examples of picture writing to create a bulletin board display. They will discover that some symbols look like what they stand for (*like the “no smoking” symbol, phone, wheelchair, etc.*). Other times there are signs and symbols stand for things that we really can’t draw a picture of—think of math and science signs. The human body employs a sort of picture writing that we call “body language”. Of course, there is the almost universal obscene gesture of the raised middle finger or fist. With that as a starting point, experiment with body languages. Easy nonverbal vocabulary would be “hello” (and goodbye), “you go first” “I don’t know”, *etc.* How do we know when someone is nervous? Bored? Students should be on the alert for new movements to add to their body language dictionary. Were there movements in the Ailey II performance that suggested any of this vocabulary?

Write a Fantasy. In some ways, dance is like telling a fantasy story—things that are impossible are accepted as real. The audience decides to “suspend their disbelief”. We do the same thing when we read fantasy fiction; we are willing to pretend with the writer, as long as the characters’ actions make sense within the story. Have students write their own fantasy fiction. There may have been a dance piece in the Ailey II program that suggested a story to students. If not, students can get many ideas by exploring “what if” questions. What if animals could talk? What if portraits on walls could talk and move about? The best part about writing fantasy is that students learn to use adjectives and adverbs to be specific! Prewriting exercises should include:

- **Invent characters.** Fantasy characters can be real people, talking animals, dragons, talking plants, or creatures invented by the author.
- **Create a problem to solve.** What does the main character want? Why can’t he get what he wants?
- **Invent a setting.** Fantasy can take place anywhere, anytime—in the backyard or in a magical place. Students will discover that they need to use sensory details so that their readers can see the setting in their minds.

Read it Aloud. Have students bring in favorite descriptive passages from novels or short stories (characters, settings, events, emotions, *etc.*) and read them aloud to the class. This is an excellent opportunity to encourage students to read with oral expression that matches the mood of the text!

Dance the Story. A possible follow-up to *Write a Fantasy* or *Read it Aloud* would be to have students use their fantasy fiction story or selected passage as inspiration for a movement piece. They can work in small groups to prepare the piece for performance. Group members would be responsible for

choreography, set, lights, sound, and performance. The sound used could be original live or recorded music, selected prerecorded music, or even have the text recorded so that the sound designer could enhance the words with special effects (*echo, overlapping whispers, invented sounds, etc.*).

Poetry. Dance and poetry are quite similar in that the poet searches for just the right words (*and in the right amount!*) and there is a form and structure to the work. The following ideas are simple ideas that reflect the playful nature of poetry:

- **Five W’s Poetry** answers *Who? What? Where? When? and Why?*

David
Loves to dance
In the middle of the wheat field
Just at sunset
Because the grain tickles his ears

- **Telephone-Number Poetry** uses a phone number to determine the number of syllables in each line of the poem. For instance, if the phone number is 816-555-1212, the first line will have eight syllables, the second will have one, the third six, and so on.

- **Crazy Combinations Poetry** has one of these combinations in every line:

*the name of an animal and a kitchen utensil
a color and a fruit
a body part and a famous person
a power source and a dance
OR any other crazy combination!*

Resources

Allison, Linda. *Blood and Guts: A Working Guide to Your Own Insides*, 1976.

Asimov, Isaac. *The Human Body: Its structure and Operation*, 1963, 1992.

Barlin, Anne and Paul. *The Art of Learning Through Movement*, 1971.

ATTENTION TEACHERS & STUDENTS

Thank you for participating in our arts in education programming. KCFAA reaches over 30,000 students in the Kansas City metropolitan area each year. We would like to read essays and poems, see and listen to audio and videotapes, and enjoy artwork and photographs resulting from activity choices you make after seeing *Ailey II*.

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