

njpac
arts
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performance
series



Caroline I. Darby, Photo by Andrew Eccles

alvin ailey
american dance
theater

teacher resource guide

about the performance

Founded in 1958 by visionary choreographer Alvin Ailey, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater became a dynamic force in modern dance by honoring African American cultural expression and invigorating the American modern dance tradition. Its groundbreaking repertoire includes nearly 300 works by over 100 choreographers, and its signature piece, *Revelations* (1960), remains a powerful embodiment of resilience and spiritual heritage. Designated a “vital American cultural ambassador” by the United States Congress, the company has toured across six continents. Today under new leadership (Alicia Graf Mack), it continues to inspire global audiences with passion, diversity and profound artistry.

cultural connections

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) is deeply rooted in the cultural experiences of African Americans and serves as a vital bridge between dance and cultural identity. Founded in 1958 during the Civil Rights Movement, the company was created by Alvin Ailey to give voice to Black artists whose stories were often excluded from mainstream dance. His signature work, *Revelations*, draws heavily from Black spirituals and gospel portraying the sorrow, hope and joy of the African American experience.

Beyond performance, the company promotes cultural education and empowerment through programs like AileyCamp and the Ailey School, nurturing young dancers from all backgrounds. The repertoire features work by choreographers of diverse racial and cultural identities, embracing a global narrative while preserving African American traditions.

Internationally, AAADT is celebrated as a cultural ambassador, showcasing American diversity through dance across six continents. Its performances highlight the universality of the human spirit, breaking racial and cultural boundaries. In doing so, the company not only elevates Black culture but also fosters cross-cultural dialogue and understanding.



James Gliner and Samantha Figgins. Photo by Andrew Eccles

vocabulary

Ballet Technique

A dance form started in the royal courts of Europe. The body is held mostly upright, and the legs are turned out from the hip. Ballet uses five basic positions of the feet. Ballet terms are always spoken in French

Choreographer

A person who composes dance works

Ensemble

A group of artists who perform together. Ensembles can be made up of dancers, musicians or actors

Gospel Music

A genre of Christian music that is characterized by its use of strong vocals, rich harmonies and spiritual or religious lyrics that express themes of faith, hope, worship and salvation. It originated in African American churches in the early 20th century, drawing influences from spirituals, hymns, blues and jazz

The Great Depression

A period of severe global economic downturn from 1929 to 1939. It was characterized by high rates of unemployment and poverty, drastic reductions in industrial production and trade and widespread bank and business failures around the world.

Jim Crow

The laws, customs and practices that enforced racial segregation and discrimination in the United States from the 1880s to the 1960s. The term comes from a minstrel show character that popularized harmful stereotypes of African Americans. These laws affected almost every aspect of daily life with the goal to social/economically burden as well as criminalize African Americans.

Legacy

Something that is handed down or left behind by a person, group or culture, often after they are gone, such as values, achievements, traditions or physical contributions (like art, buildings, or writings) that continue to influence or impact others in the future.

Modern Dance

A highly expressive style of dance that challenges the structured dance technique of classical ballet. The focus of modern dance is expression, freeform and fluid; it's often inspired by other dance styles like African dance, ballet and folk dance. Modern dancers often perform barefoot in tight costumes that showcase the shapes of their bodies

Motif

A distinct repeating pattern that develops meaning throughout an artistic work, such as a pattern of movements in a dance, themes in a story or notes in a song

Repertoire

The collection of dances regularly performed by a company

Revelation

1. A surprising and previously unknown fact, especially one that is made known in a dramatic way
2. The divine or supernatural disclosure of something relating to human existence or the world

Solo

A performance by one person

Spirituals

Religious folk songs that originated among African Americans in the United States during the era of slavery. They express deep spiritual beliefs, longing for freedom and hope in the face of suffering. These songs combined African musical traditions with Christian teachings and were used for worship, comfort and sometimes as coded messages related to escape and resistance. Spirituals laid the foundation for later genres like gospel, blues and jazz.

Tableau

Short for the French *tableau vivant*, which means “living picture.” A tableau is a representation of a dramatic scene by a person or group posing silently without moving

Work

A word dancers use to refer to a dance; other words used in this manner are “piece” and “ballet”

inspired learning for the classroom

	Teacher Focus	Student Activity	NJ Student Learning Standards
P	Prepare Discover what your students already know about this art form, topic or type of performance. Then explain more fully what they will see at the theater and why it's important. This can be accomplished by sharing images, vocabulary, videos or context that might help them appreciate the performance more fully.	Begin a class discussion with the following question: What comes to mind when you think of the African American experience? Introduce the students to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater through the following videos and readings: Video: The Life of Alvin Ailey Article: Alvin Ailey Bio Video: Revelations by Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater	English Language Arts SL.9–10.1.C, W.9–10.2.A Visual and Performing Arts Anchor Standard 7, 11
E	Experience Before the performance, go over audience etiquette. Encourage students to enter the venue quietly and respectfully. Ensure that all phones are turned off. Remind students to stay seated to avoid distracting others. Also, share with students that it is acceptable to clap or cheer during natural breaks (after a musical number or routine). Explain to students the meaning of the term motif.	Provide students with the following questions to consider while watching the show: 1. Do you notice a motif in the performance? If so, what do you think is the significance behind it? 2. What are the different musical genres showcased in the performance? 3. What are the different dance influences showcased in this performance?	Visual and Performing Arts Anchor Standard 6, 7, 11
R	Reflect As a class, discuss the prompts from the previous section. Then have students reflect on the skill set of the performers they saw in the show. Go around the class and have each student fill in the following statement: "I can already _____ like the performers did, but I can't _____ yet." After everyone is done, remind them that with enough time and practice, they can accomplish anything they set their minds to. After reflecting together, give students the chance to reflect privately by freeform writing or responding to a prompt.	Respond to the following prompt: What do you think is the overall goal of the performance? Do you think that goal was achieved and how?	Visual and Performing Arts Anchor Standard 7, 9, 10
F	Focus Have students do research and activity sheets that focus on one of the following elements: The Artist: How did the life experience of the artist influence their work? The Form: What is the history and significance of this specific style of art? The History: What is there to learn about the time period, culture, social movement or place this performance references? Before they begin, have students list two or three things they hope to learn during their research.	Complete the activity sheets and review the vocabulary and resources. Activity Sheet Link	English Language Arts NJLSA.W5, NJLSA.SL1 Social Studies 6.1.12.HistorySE.14.a
O	Originate The Artist: Have students reflect on their own life and what art could be inspired from their experience. Have them decide which art form they will use to tell their life story, and begin the brainstorming process. The Form: Have students create a work of art using the same form they saw in the performance about any topic of their choice. The History: Have students choose a social movement that is important to them and create a work of art in any form they choose to express their opinion on that movement.		Social Emotional Learning Self-Awareness, Social Awareness Visual and Performing Arts Anchor Standard 1, 2, 10, 11
R	Rehearse Give students time to continue developing their creation. If time allows, let them develop their projects on their own, then break the class out into small groups to discuss their ideas and receive additional ideas from peers. As they are working, use this time to walk around and ask them each about their project, the materials they are using, and what inspired them.		Social Emotional Learning Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills Visual and Performing Arts Anchor Standard 2, 5, 7
M	Mix it all together! Once everyone is done, come to an agreement as a class on how it would be best to share what everyone's been working on. Allow each student to present their work, discussing their research and what inspired them. Remind students to be respectful of one another. Between presentations, allow two or three students to describe their reactions to the work that was presented. Encourage them to use phrases like "It reminded me of _____" or "It made me feel _____" rather than describing the project as good or bad.		Social Emotional Learning Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, Responsible Decision-Making Visual and Performing Arts Anchor Standard 5, 6, 7, 8

curriculum standards

English Language Arts

NJSLSA.SL1

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively

NJSLSA.W5

Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

SL.9–10.1.C

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

W.9–10.2.A

Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

Social Emotional Learning

Responsible Decision Making

Recognizing how critical thinking skills are useful both inside and outside of school; Identifying solutions for personal and social problems; Learning how to make a reasoned judgment after analyzing information, data, and facts; Demonstrating curiosity and open-mindedness

Relationship Skills

Communicating effectively; Practicing teamwork and collaborative problem-solving

Self Awareness

Integrating personal & social identities; Identifying ones' emotions; Linking feelings, values and thoughts

Social Awareness

Taking others' perspectives; Showing concern for the feelings of others; demonstrating empathy and compassion

Social Studies

6.1.12.HistorySE.14.a

Explore the various ways women, racial and ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ community, and individuals with disabilities have contributed to the American economy, politics and society.

Visual & Performing Arts

Anchor Standard 1

Conceptualizing and generating ideas

Anchor Standard 2

Organizing and developing ideas

Anchor Standard 5

Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation

Anchor Standard 6

Convey meaning through presentation of artistic work

Anchor Standard 7

Perceiving and analyzing products

Anchor Standard 8

Applying criteria to evaluate products

Anchor Standard 10

Synthesizing and relating knowledge and personal experiences to create products.

Anchor Standard 11

Relating artistic ideas and works within societal, cultural, and historical contexts to deepen understanding.

additional resources

NJPAC

About NJPAC

njpac.org/about

NJPAC's Arts Education programs

njpac.org/arts-education

NJPAC's David G. Berger Master Class Series

njpac.org/berger

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Activity Sheets

njpac.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/AlvinAiley_Activitysheets.pdf

Websites

Alvin Ailey

ailey.org

Alvin Ailey Bio

ailey.org/people/alvin-ailey

The Great Depression

history.com/articles/great-depression-history

Jim Crow Laws

history.com/articles/jim-crow-laws

Videos

Alvin Ailey Dance Theater Is Trying To Make Modern Dance "Pop" Again

youtube.com/watch?v=ww5LhwdOoZ4

The Black Church

youtube.com/watch?v=SwWqkk4Ha70

The Black Church | The Role of Music

youtube.com/watch?v=lgvXwLAiNYw

Divining by Judith Jamison

youtube.com/watch?v=S5y4faQzgQk

Exodus by Rennie Harris

youtube.com/watch?v=Is2_Q7_-IHE

Four Corners by Ronald K. Brown

youtube.com/watch?v=wR8aDe_mtBE

Horton Technique Class at MIU

youtube.com/watch?v=4nMEhx-gcQE

The life of Alvin Ailey

youtube.com/watch?v=Uj_qoMzTgpY

Revelations by Alvin Ailey

youtube.com/watch?v=tNqaixKbrjs

The River by Alvin Ailey

youtube.com/watch?v=iDyfWg4PRFY

bring the arts to your school

In-School Residencies

NJPAC teaching artists come right to your school to teach the performing arts to your students. Our super-flexible in-person residencies are designed to meet your needs and you'll have a dedicated program manager to help you every step of the way. It's the perfect program to keep your students creating, connecting and expressing themselves through the magic of the arts.

Professional Development

Calling all educators! Expand your teaching skills, deepen your curriculum and give yourself a creative boost in NJPAC's forward-thinking professional development workshops. Our virtual PD programs are for teachers all the way from pre-K to high school and include hip hop, dance, storytelling, theater, music and more. Not only will you learn something... you'll also have fun and be inspired.

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arts training for students

Saturday Programs

NJPAC's Saturday programs are geared towards students at every level — from those who dream of starring on Broadway to those who are still learning their scales. Students work with professional artists to build technique and develop their own creative style in hip hop, jazz, theater, musical theater and symphonic band.

Summer Programs

Want to begin to explore the arts? Or immerse yourself in the study of one genre? Then join us at NJPAC next summer in our immersive programs that spark the creativity in every child through the study of music, dance and theater.

contact us!

For more information or to schedule an appointment, please email our team at artseducation@njpac.org. Or visit njpac.org/education

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