KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

UNIT 12: CONTEMPORARY DANCE TECHNIQUE
Alvin Ailey

A. DEVELOPMENT OF CONTEMPORARY DANCE

Origins and change
Contemporary dance developed from modern dance's challenge to the formal rules and conventions of classical ballet. It expanded the possibilities of movement, subject matter, music, staging and the role of the dancer. It is not one fixed style: techniques and choreographic approaches continue to evolve.

Early modern dance pioneers
Isadora Duncan – valued natural, expressive movement, freedom and the relationship between movement and music. Loie Fuller – explored movement, fabric, light and visual effects. Mary Wigman – expressionist movement, emotional intensity and experimentation with rhythm and space. Rudolf Laban – developed influential ideas for observing, describing and analysing movement.

Later developments and techniques
Martha Graham – contraction and release, spirals, floor work and breath; movement often communicates psychological tension. Doris Humphrey / José Limón – weight, suspension, fall and recovery; the body works with gravity. Merce Cunningham – movement initiated from the spine, curves of the spine, abstraction and chance procedures; movement may be independent of the music. Alvin Ailey – fused modern dance with African-American cultural influences, spirituals, jazz and ballet; powerful theatrical storytelling and ensemble work.

Current and continuing practice
Contemporary choreographers continue to combine and question styles, techniques, music and theatrical forms. Examples such as Akram Khan Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Matthew Bourne.

Who was Alvin Ailey?
Alvin Ailey (1931–1989) was an American choreographer and founder of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (1958). His work drew on modern dance training and African-American cultural experience, including blues, jazz, spirituals and the church. He brought these influences to concert dance stages and helped broaden visibility and opportunities for Black dancers and stories.

His influences
Ballet – use of 'turn out', arabesque lines,

- Horton Technique – deep plies in 2nd, lateral 'T', Egyptian arms
- Graham Technique – contractions, spirals
- Jazz (Jack Cole)–pirouettes in parallel, isolations, body ripples
- Broadway – sense of 'theatre' i.e., climatic celebration in 'Rocka my Soul' (Revelations)
- Katherine Dunham – undulating walks and spine ripples

Contributions

1. Founded the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (1958)

- Established one of the world's most celebrated modern dance companies.
- Created opportunities for Black dancers at a time when racial barriers limited access to professional concert dance.
- Developed a company that blends modern, ballet, jazz, African, and theatrical dance styles.

2. Increased Representation of Black Experiences

- Brought African American history, culture, spirituality, and social experiences to the concert stage.
- Created works that celebrated Black identity while remaining accessible to audiences of all backgrounds.
- Challenged the lack of diversity within the dance world.

3. Created *Revelations* (1960)

- Choreographed one of the most performed and recognized works in contemporary dance.
- Drew on memories of his childhood in the American South and the influence of the Black church.
- Demonstrated how personal and cultural stories could be expressed through modern dance.
- Established a model for narrative and emotionally driven contemporary dance.

4. Blended Multiple Dance Styles

- Combined techniques from modern dance, ballet, jazz, African dance, and social dance traditions.
- Broadened the possibilities of contemporary choreography by creating a more inclusive movement vocabulary.
- Influenced generations of choreographers to work across different dance genres.

5. Made Modern Dance More Accessible

- Believed that dance should be for everyone, not just elite audiences.
- Created works that were emotionally engaging and relatable.
- Increased public appreciation and understanding of contemporary dance.

6. Promoted Dance Education

- Established educational programmes and training opportunities through the Ailey organisation.
- Helped develop young dancers from diverse backgrounds.
- Encouraged wider participation in dance within communities.

7. Developed a Humanistic Approach to Choreography

- Focused on universal themes such as faith, resilience, community, love, struggle, and hope.
- Created work that connected deeply with audiences through emotion and storytelling.
- Demonstrated that contemporary dance could communicate powerful social and personal experiences.

REVELATIONS (1960)

Facts

Choreographer: Alvin Ailey. Premiere: 31 January 1960, New York. Music: traditional African-American spirituals and gospel material. Ailey drew on memories of his childhood in Texas, including church singing and a baptism.

Structure and journey

1. Pilgrim of Sorrow – explores struggle, hardship, faith and the desire to rise. Key songs: I Been 'Buked, Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel, Fix Me, Jesus.
2. Take Me to the Water – centres on baptism, water, purification and spiritual renewal. Key material: Processional/Honor, Honor, Wade in the Water, I Wanna Be Ready.
3. Move, Members, Move – celebrates church community, collective energy, faith and joy. Key songs: Sinner Man, The Day is Past and Gone, You May Run On, Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham.

CRY (1971)

Facts

Choreographer: Alvin Ailey. Premiere: 1971, New York City Center. Original performer: Judith Jamison. Form: approximately 16-minute solo in three parts. Ailey created it as a birthday present for his mother and dedicated it to "all Black women everywhere – especially our mothers."

Structure and music

Part 1: Alice Coltrane, Something About John Coltrane.
Part 2: Laura Nyro, Been on a Train.
Part 3: Voices of East Harlem, Right On, Be Free (written by Chuck Griffin).
The work moves through contrasting emotional and musical worlds, commonly read as a journey through hardship, endurance and triumphant joy.

Movement and symbolism

The soloist uses a large white costume with a long skirt and a length of white fabric. The fabric changes function and meaning: it can suggest a burden, a barrier, a practical cloth or a symbol of dignity. Notice the contrast between grounded, weighted movement and expansive gestures; sustained reaches; changes in level; strong use of the torso and arms; and the increasing energy and release across the solo.

Interpretation and significance

The soloist is often understood as representing Black women across generations, particularly mothers. The work foregrounds resilience, dignity, suffering and celebration. Jamison's original performance made the role iconic; later performers bring their own interpretation while preserving the work's choreographic structure