

EBONY

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHOREOGRAPHER ALONZO KING

By Sergio Mims



The words "visionary," "eclectic" and "extraordinarily creative" all perfectly fit acclaimed choreographer Alonzo King. Founder of the San Francisco based LINES ballet, the Georgia-born and California-raised King, who has been received numerous dance and arts awards and was named a Master of Choreography by the Kennedy Center has created works for legendary dances companies around the world, including the Frankfurt Ballet, the Joffrey Ballet, the Dance Theater of Harlem, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the Washington Ballet and the Hong Kong Ballet.

King was recently in Chicago to work with the Hubbard Street Dance Company on his acclaimed and vibrant "Following the Subtle Current Upstream," and we were lucky enough to have wide-ranging and terrific conversation with him about dance, how the social networking revolution causes more harm than good and why anyone can be taught to dance.

EBONY: I understand that you come from a pretty prominent family...

KING: Well, my father was profiled in EBONY and JETmagazines. His name is Slater King, and he was the president of the Albany Movement in Georgia during the civil rights struggle. He worked with Martin Luther King and was very close friends with Malcolm X. There is a collection of their correspondence at the Fisk University Library. He was a heavy wheeler-dealer in the Civil Rights Movement. And my uncle Preston King, a lecturer and professor of philosophy, refused to go into the U.S. Army because they refused to treat him as a human being.

EBONY: Didn't he go and live in England and his daughter went into politics?

KING: Yes, his daughter Oona Tamsyn King is my cousin and a baroness and a member of the House of Lords in Parliament.

EBONY: So you come from an illustrious background?

KING: Just wanted to establish that. Forgive my vanity [laughs].

EBONY: But to get to it, why dance for you instead some other form of artistic expression,

such as painting or writing?

KING: Well, I do paint and I do write, and I love those because I think of them as all the same thing. But when I was a kid I was always moving, and I remember that when I looked at adults, I would watch their body movements and listen to them talk; their bodies seemed to be telling the truth while their mouths were saying something else. So dance became a reason for me to get information and to give information.

EBONY: When did you realize that dancing could be a career for you?

KING: I always danced, but there was a point in high school when I had gotten offers from a lot of prestigious universities and it was like, "You gotta decide what you're going to do." My father said, "Do whatever you want to do," and my mother said, "Please go to a university [laughs]. And so I really had to really make a choice. I had to consider what could I give my life to, because I was interested in a lot of different things, as are most people. We have skills to do all kinds of things, but we have to choose something.

We could be attracted to a lot of people, but if we're going to get hooked up, it's got to be one person. You want to commit to something. So in that regard, I thought, 'What profession could I commit to that would keep me engaged for a lifetime, that I won't cheat on? What I could be with and would be good to until death do us part?' It was dance. [Laughs].

EBONY: Who have been your influences in dance?

KING: To talk about the broad picture, I think everything influences you. I think I would like my dances to be like Harriet Tubman. I would like my dances to be like Mahatma Gandhi. These heroes and heroines. The way people live is the way you want to dance. It wants to be honest, it wants to be fearless, it wants to be investigated, it wants to have humility, it wants to realize that it's not the doer that's really dancing. You want the spirit to enter you and animate you. So in a profound way, what people think of dancing is more than just dancing. Because ultimately in the highest realm if you ask great dancers what was their best movement and they'll always say it just like when I felt I was being danced. There's a saying that I love: "When the vessel is empty, that's when the spirit enters."

EBONY: So you think that everyone has a gift and we spend most of our lives trying to find out that this is?

KING: I sure do. And I think that all children are born with gifts and that people are not interested in their gifts. What they're interested in is forcing children into working toward goals that they think will make them happy, and they equate happiness with money. The whole educational system is based on math and science because adults feel that those are the fields of prestige, honor and where you're going to garner money. And all education is headed that way.

In a great education, you look at what the gifts of the child are. In schools in India founded by the poet and writer Rabindranath Tagore, they study what are the gifts of the child are. Are they athletic? Are they poetic? Are they academic? Then they balance that education but put an emphasis on what their gifts are. Children are brilliant; they're born brilliant. The problem is that they're forced to learn and to become one way. Conforming is the way it is.

EBONY: The killing of imagination.

KING: Thank you! Children know. Children can see a complicated ballet and they get it, because their intuition hasn't been cut off. They're not worried about you judging them and they see it and feel it and know it. But you get into education and it's stripped away. It's a slaughtering. So people who say, "I think differently, I see differently, I don't care what anybody else says," the ones who go against the grain, the ones who go upstream, then that's the way then it has to be.

EBONY: With people doing all of this social networking, looking down at their BlackBerrys, cell phones and iPads, we've become closed off from one other. You believe the arts are even more important now for people to express some sense of belonging and to communicate.

KING: Even though phone booths have been eradicated from all cities, people are still in their own private phone booths, isolated, and there's no sense of community. It's cold, it's chilling and it has one of things that that I find worse than being mean: indifference.

EBONY: Well, it's like this whole Twitter thing—are you really so egocentric that you think people are interested in every minute detail of your life?

KING: I think a lot of people don't think they're living unless there's a viewer. [Their lives are] not real unless someone is looking, and that's sad because it means they have no internal life. And so they're really begging, "Look at me!"

EBONY: So what makes a great dancer?

KING: The same thing that makes a great person. [For example,] Harriet Tubman. Wouldn't you like to see someone dance like that? To be that heroic, to be that giving, to be that unself-conscious so that you are living for an idea. Because that's what dance is, ideas. To be so absorbed into an idea that you're living it and it's real to you.

EBONY: I have to ask this one last question: Can anyone be taught to dance, even a schulb like me?

KING: Yes, because you are not a schulb. You are a human being with unlimited potential. And what does that mean? It means you have a body, but inside that body you have a mind and a heart. A body is like a piano, it's an instrument or a saxophone or a drum. You play it, but the body doesn't dance itself. It's the mind and the heart that dances the body. But what most people really need to do to really dance is to just let go. That's it, that's all it is.

All is it is how to cut the strings. How to cut the strings of fear, the strings of judgment, how to cut the string of what's good and bad and, baby, just move!