

## Dance

# No Fancy Moves, Just a Natural Flow

Alonzo King's approach has as much to do with energetic force as with pliés and tendus.

By GIA KOURLAS

In his dual role of choreographer and teacher, Alonzo King is training the heart and the mind as well as the body. "You are presenting choices," he said in a recent telephone interview from San Francisco. That goes for his dancers, too.

"What is the motive in your movement?" he continued. "Are you working with your left hand at the barre to get a job, or are you really trying to transform your life? Is there something that you want to bring to this art form that no one else has brought to it?"

Such questions have informed Mr. King's dance philosophy since he founded the ballet company, Lines, in 1982. On Wednesday, the troupe will appear at SummerStage in two of his works: "Sand," with music by the jazz artists Jason Moran and Charles Lloyd; and "Biophony," a collaboration with the natural soundscape artist Bernie Krause and the composer Richard Blackford.

Born in Georgia to civil rights activist parents, Mr. King, who chooses not to give his age, was raised in Santa Barbara. "Wherever I looked," he said, "I could see the horizon. I could see ocean. I could see mountain."

His training brought him to New York, where he attended the School of American Ballet and the Harkness School of Ballet, among others, before heading back to California to form Lines.

Mr. King's teaching method and approach to dance have as much to do with energetic force as they do with pliés and tendus. And his influence radiates out. Silas Farley, a member of the New York City Ballet, was 10 and a student at the North Carolina Theater School of Dance when Mr. King choreographed a ballet there and featured him in it. Mr. King introduced Mr. Farley to ballet as a world of ideas.

They haven't formally worked together again, but Mr. Farley said he considered Mr. King "a mentor from a distance." On a recent trip to San Francisco, Mr. Farley, who teaches at the City Ballet-affiliated School of American Ballet, paid a visit to Mr. King and watched him teach class.

"His whole manner is very intentional, with deep streams of thought," Mr. Farley said. "There is nothing superficial, artificial, phony about anything he says, or the way he teaches or choreographs."

Mr. Farley described how Mr. King taught a movement phrase to his students and had them repeat it until it was ingrained in their bodies: "He said: 'Now let go of your fancy plans. I don't want to see you thinking; I want to see you dancing.'"

For Mr. King, getting to the essence is everything: Great movement is like great thought. "You look at dancers, and dancers dance who they are," Mr. King said. "You can't get away from it."

Here are edited excerpts from a recent phone conversation with Mr. King.

**Did you discover dance through your mother?**

Yes. She took creative movement at university, and when I was a kid she would teach me stuff, and I loved it. It was a form of intimacy.

I noticed that she moved different than other people.

**What was it about her dancing that was different?**

She would accent a beat, but she was in the music instead of on it. And that looked mysterious. Very different and very personal and unconcerned about the viewer. I was very attracted to it, and I never stopped.

**Why did you want to create a dance to natural sounds?**

What was fascinating to me about Bernie Krause's story is that he had this obsession with recording sound. He said that he was A.D.D., and in order to capture the sounds, he had to be perfectly still.

**What did that reveal to you?**



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON HENRY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Above, the choreographer Alonzo King rehearsing with his company, Lines, in San Francisco. Members of his dance troupe, clockwise from far left: Shuaib Elhassan; Robb Beresford, left, with Adji Cissoko; Jeffrey Van Sciver; and Yujin Kim.

### Lines

Wednesday at SummerStage, Central Park; cityparksfoundation.org

### How?

I can use dancers like Legos, but I believe that human beings are brilliant. Science tells us now that the human body is electromagnetic energy — it is swirling in nonstop energy with billions of cells that are dying and being born in a second. That is mind-boggling. That is just the body.

The other thing is uniqueness and brilliance. I've never met a stupid person, but I've met people who were blocked.

### How does that relate to dancers?

You don't want to use someone the same way all the time. It's unfair. They have to have a large diet and have a huge appetite.

### You trained in ballet from a very early age.

Yes. I came to New York and was at practically every school that there was at full scholarship. [Antonina] Tumkovsky was an inspiration; she accepted me at the School of American Ballet. I saw her fighting for me. She made a big difference in my life.

### How do you describe talent?

Most people think that it is a facile body, but I think talent really has more to do with 10 character traits.

### Like what?

Perseverance. Courage. Inspiration. Believing in yourself even when there is apparently no evidence.

### I love that last one. I'm going to write it on the wall.

[Laughs] That's what you're looking at on-stage. Like I said, dancers dance who they are. You can see who's afraid.

### You recently created a work for San Francisco Ballet. How do you bring your philosophy to dancers you're not so familiar with?

You'll find that when you go and work with other companies that there are people who think just like you do, but they were keeping quiet. [Laughs] And there are people who are so tired of being used the same way again and again. So you look. You find your people.

That was such a beautiful illustration of how when we fix our mind on something, all the gnats, flies, mosquitoes, worries, doubts and impediments really get pushed aside. He said that that work transformed him as a human being. And that's the same thing that dancers are doing — or anyone who's serious about their life.

**I watched you teach an open class, and I found it to be both mystical and concrete. When you choreograph, do you create a**

### similar atmosphere?

To be really frank, that was a taste.

### It was different because outsiders were present?

[Laughs] The kind of vulnerability and the kind of candor that happens with people who trust you and feel safe with you is for private spaces. But I do know that the way people use artists tells you what they feel about humanity.

### #SPEAKINGINDANCE

## When Movement Becomes Meaning

"I've been focusing on the crossover between language and dance," said the choreographer Will Rawls, who has been in residence at Issue Project Room since January. "How they are both forms of communication and how they can sometimes become one another." For him, language can be a weapon and a tool; in this series — he performs a different iteration on Thursday and Friday at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington as part of the exhibition "Does the body rule the mind or does the mind rule the body?" — he uses his body like a cursor. A cursor is a "figure that is moved through space by the production of language," Mr. Rawls said. "So it is like a dancer. It's also not the text that it leaves behind, but something else entirely." In these choreographic experiments, Mr. Rawls spells out a phrase; this one is from Sonia Sotomayor's dissent in the Supreme Court's travel ban decision. Mr. Rawls's work is born from some of the same impulses as Judson Dance Theater, the 1960s collective in which tasks became part of the performance: "The amazing complexity of dance and all that it can bring up has made me want to move toward really simple gestures," he said. "To really feel and see how a moving body — even if it's doing something very simply — can have huge effects on how we make sense of the world." GIA KOURLAS

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