

THE DAYS OF YORE

interviews artists about the years before they had money, fame, or road maps to success, and inspires you to find your own.

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Interview by Astri von Arbin Ahlander

Sylvia Waters



Sylvia Waters is the Artistic Director for Ailey II, the junior company of the renown Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, which she has led since its inception in 1974. Waters was hand-picked by Alvin Ailey to lead the new venture and under her direction Ailey II has grown into a powerful company in its own right. Prior to joining the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater as a principal dancer in 1968, Waters lived in Paris and worked with Michel Descombey, then director of the Paris Opera Ballet, as well as Milko Sparembleck. She performed at the Summer Olympics in Mexico City in 1968.

Waters received her Bachelor of Science degree in Dance from Juilliard. In 1997, she was awarded an honorary doctorate from the State University of New York at Oswego and in the spring of 2010, she was a guest lecturer in dance at Harvard University.

Waters has served as a panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts as well as for the New York State Council on the Arts. In 2008, she was awarded the Legacy Award as part of the 20th Annual IABD Festival, Syracuse University's Women of Distinction Award, and the prestigious Dance Magazine Award.

Were you a child who danced all the time?

I was a child who *moved*. I was a child with a lot of energy. My mother started me off in piano lessons. So, my physical outlet in addition to piano was sports. Running track was my favorite. Playing basketball. And it was in junior high school that I began to get on the dance track.

How?

In our phys ed classes we had what I called "The General" for a phys ed teacher. We wore these gym suits and we had to get dressed in a minute and a half, then at the end you had to undress....all in a minute and a half! She was all about discipline. The fascinating thing about her was that she never wore a gym suit herself. She was always wearing the most wonderful suits and high heels.

We had these little things called tap bags sewn onto our gym suits. We would put these taps on the bottom of our sneakers and she [the General] would teach us time steps. You know, it took me years to realize how she did that in her high heels. She had obviously danced at one time. She also started an after school modern dance class. It wasn't called modern dance, it was called interpretive dance.

Then I had a girlfriend, my best friend, who was studying dance at the New Dance Group. She had one of those no-bones bodies. She kept telling me, "You've got to come down to the New Dance Group, you really should come." She'd show me the exercises, the floor work in her little room and I said, "Oh God, this hurts, I can't do this..."

So all of these signals were coming to me. Even the kids that I baby-sat for, I would take them to dance class on Saturdays and I would watch them do their tap class and their jazz class and their ballet class. So it was all around me, but it wasn't until my first year of high school, when I saw that there was a choice of gym or dance.

And you chose dance?

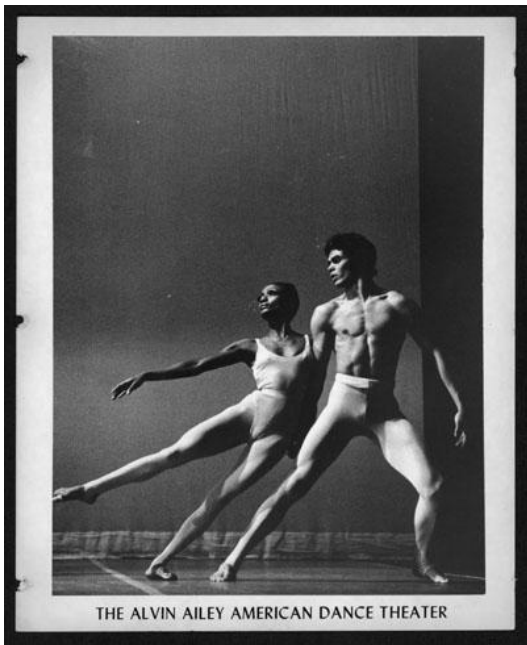
Yes. I went right into dance. And it was there that I really began to experience dance movement. I had a teacher who was, I guess, very interested in her students— as you would hope all teachers would be. She would bring in books and wonderful pictures of dancers, modern dancers, all kinds of dance. She finally said to me one day, “You really seem to like this a lot and you seem really good at this, have you ever thought of studying seriously?” The light bulb somehow came on and I went down to the New Dance Group, just as my friend had suggested, and that’s when it started.

Dance requires so much physical as well as mental discipline. How did you learn that?

It was the energy, I guess, the thirst for that kind of activity, that kind of stimulation. It was exhilarating. It was a discovery. It was a self-discovery. It was something that made me feel really good. I don’t think I could have explained it at the time.

My parents, neither one of them was involved in the arts, so they were on the sidelines. But very supportive. I mean, I was a good student. And I also was a very social person.

When I think back, I don’t know how I did it all. Because after school, I would go down to the New Dance Group directly. I started off with just two classes a week and then finally I was taking eight classes a week, two classes a day after school! And I somehow still had my social activities: ice skating, roller skating....and doing my homework too!



How did you end up at Juilliard?

That same girlfriend [who had mentioned the New Dance Group] told me about Juilliard. She was going to go up and get an application and said, “Why don’t you come with me?” I did. And I was just mesmerized by the place. Seeing all those people, dressed in black with their buns, moving together...It was just the spirit of the place. Plus, they had an academic program, so that was for me. I got an application, I auditioned, and I got in.

My parents were very proud of that. They supported that financially, emotionally. But I can remember my dad saying, “Even though you graduated from Juilliard with a B.S. degree, I still think it would be a good idea if you took that civil service exam...” I said, “You must be kidding! Absolutely not! I am going to make my living doing this!” And there’s the rub: because I had no idea what I was going to do. And when I think back, he must have been horrified! Like any parent. But he said, “Okay.”

Good for him for saying “Okay.” A lot of parents would have pushed more.

Yeah, well I guess they trusted me. I was a very stable child. I was very interested in everything going on around me. I was very forward. I was very independent. So, I guess they trusted I would do what I said.

You never experienced self-doubt? You were always clear on what you wanted?

I was clear. I realize now how very lucky, how very fortunate that was for me. To have that projectile, you know. So often students, even while they’re in college, are changing their majors all the time...but you know, if you’re an artist, you’re an artist because you have to do that thing. It’s that passion, that something that identifies you as a person. You *have* to do it, that is why you do it.

What did you do after you graduated from Juilliard?

For three years, I was auditioning like mad. I was taking classes at the Graham School, doing ballet all over the place. I was looking for work on Broadway, I was working with concert dance companies. At that time, companies didn’t have year contracts. They were pick-up companies. They would rehearse, rehearse, rehearse for months and months and months, with no money, and then have one or two or three performances and that was it, until they got together again. I mean, there

were some that had more consistent work, but there weren't that many companies. There were ballet companies, but not in modern dance.

I was auditioning and I was feeling like something was going to happen, but I didn't know what. I also had a part-time job.

What was the part-time job?

My first one was working in what is now a trendy area in New York—the meatpacking district. Back then it was definitely a meat packing district! I was a bookkeeper's assistant. I worked in this tiny little office. And I just watched the meat rolling by...they would go in as lambs and come out as chops.

I was also always taking classes in the summer, summer school, because Julliard was a five-year program and I was doing it in four. I went to Hunter and to City College. I took algebra, philosophy, literature. It was wonderful because there I was just a student, not a dancer, and the academic level was much higher.

Did you have other jobs?

Only when I rehearsed and did concert work. I performed with Shakespeare in the Park. We did *The Tempest* with all these people who are so famous now. Abe Vigoda, young James Earl Jones was Caliban, Mitch Ryan...

The Delacorte Theater, that is an extraordinary stage to perform on.

It was a wonderful experience. I loved it. And at the end of Shakespeare season, they would have a dance season. You saw Alvin Ailey, you saw John Butler, Donald McKayle...so I had occasion to perform there, too.

At one point, there was a choreographer I was working with who had a very extended American tour coming up. It was enough to almost give up my apartment for and I was making arrangements. But then the tour got shorter and shorter and shorter...until it was, like, three or four days. And I was just in a slump. Because I had quit my job, given up my scholarships, all for this tour that didn't happen.

I was on unemployment. It was kind of like a hiatus for me. I had this strange routine where I did nothing. I'd just go and sign for my unemployment checks.

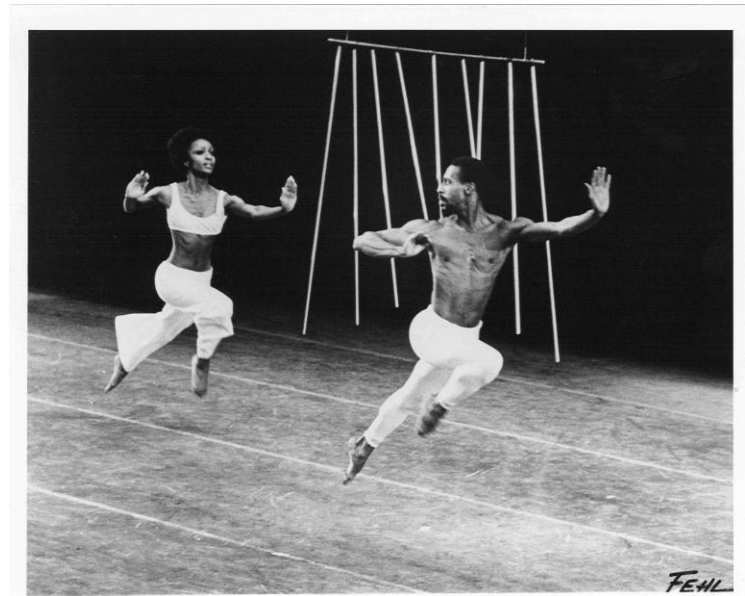
Where were you living at the time?

On the Lower East Side, which was the place to be, then too. I could pay my own rent. It was like four rooms for 48 dollars! I was feeling super independent. And then, come spring, I got tired of sitting around. I guess I was just, not smoldering, but marinating, at the time. I still took classes.

But then I started really going to auditions, a lot, for Broadway. There was something I came very close to getting—they had me come dance, they had me read, they had me do everything...But it just seemed like it was taking so long for them to decide. I was getting discouraged...you get how you get when you're waiting around for news.

At that point, someone called me, another dancer, and said, "Look, how would you like to go to Europe? There is a seven month tour of *Black Nativity* [Langston Hughes' musical], it pays X number of dollars a week," which was good, "there are just two dancers and the rest are singers." And I said, "I'll take it!"

I went down and signed my contract. After I had done that, I went down to an [Alvin] Ailey rehearsal. And he said, "Sylvia! What are you doing?" I said, "I just signed a contract with *Black Nativity*." He said, "Oh," and then asked me for another



THE ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATRE

dancer's number. And I thought, "Oh!" They needed another girl! But the funny thing is, that happened two or three times with me and Alvin.

How did you know Alvin Ailey?

It's funny. As a student at the New Dance Group when I was about thirteen, that girlfriend of mine and I were walking down 57th street—you know how teenagers tend to roam the city—so we're walking down 57th street and here comes this guy, extremely, extremely handsome. But, what was really notable about him was his openness. There was something absolutely charismatic about him. We were looking at him, and as he got closer, he smiled at us and he said, "Hi." And we were just totally shocked! We said, "Hi!" back. Then we passed, giggling and carrying on. After we had passed, we turned to look back—and so did he! You figure this is someone who you will never, ever see again in your lifetime.

Well, two weeks later, I was sitting at New Dance Group waiting for my class, and in he walks. And he said, "Hi," like he knew me. It turned out that he was going to be the substitute teacher that day for the class I was taking. And that is how I met him. This was just before he created the company, maybe 1958.

And from there you kept up the relationship?

Well, you know, dance circles are so small, everyone knows everyone. I remember one summer he asked me what I was doing for the summer, and I told him I was doing summer school to finish Juilliard in four years. He said, "Oh, okay." Then, later, I heard that he was doing a production of *West Side Story* somewhere and was looking for dancers!

Ah! Maybe he should have been more clear!

Well, the thing is: he didn't discourage me from going to school.

And it all came around somehow.

Well, when I finished Juilliard I ran into Martha Hill, who was head of the Dance Department at the time. She said, "You must get with the Alvin Ailey Company." I said, "Really?" She said, "Yes. That is going to be *the* company one day. That is going to be a very important company one day, especially for dancers of color." And then she got off the train.

Disappeared off the train with her prophesy! You knew Alvin, but did you know the Ailey Company at this time?

Well, when I went to Europe with *Black Nativity*, the Ailey Company had the same management, so we were criss-crossing all the time. And most of my friends were in the Ailey Company. In London we were all there for a month, and my show finished earlier so I would go over and meet them. Plus, I was roommates with one of the dancers and I stayed at the same hotel and everything. We were all very close.

Then, when I finished *Black Nativity*, I stayed in Copenhagen, where I had a friend. And the Ailey Company came through there. There was a possibility that I would join them there, but it was just too much rep to learn on tour. So they got someone who had been with the company who was living in Paris.

You were in Copenhagen...then what?

So I was in Copenhagen and I had some friends there and took classes, but I realized there wasn't much for me to do there. There was a woman in Stockholm, Leah Shubert, who offered me a job with her company, but she couldn't pay me for the first two months because she was waiting for a grant to come through. But I had vowed never to work without pay, especially in a foreign country. Then I got a job offer in Finland. I was interested in that, except in Finland it is very dark, so that didn't appeal to me either. I was picking and choosing...I had a nerve, right?!

I had saved enough money to really consider how resourceful I could be in Europe. So, a friend of mine and I took a vacation. We drove to Portugal. We delivered a car, that's how we paid our transportation from Copenhagen to Lisbon. I didn't do the driving, my friend did. And there were no seat belts.

Tell me about that trip.

We had five days to do it, but we did it in four. So we had an extra day to hang out in this little fishing village north of Lisbon. So, we dropped the car off, we hung out in Lisbon for a while, then we went to Spain. I got very sick, from the Spanish olive oil. I was *sick*. But on the third day, I rose again. And I went to the bullfight, and I felt fabulous. What a spectacle!

After Spain we went to Paris, and I stayed in Paris. I lived in Paris for three and a half years, and that was really a very, very enriching time for me.

What made you stay in Paris?

I had friends there. And I just wanted to explore. And I spoke French. But then I started to get work.

How did you get work?

Well, you hear about things. I did little commercials for television. Then I wrote to the Béjart Company and asked if I could have an audition, and I did. And I got it!

I was also auditioning for films while I was in Paris. I met John Huston. That was very intimidating. He was very tall and I sat there and he asked [*in a mock baritone*] “So, what do you think of Paris?” I read for a part for Peter Glenville for a film that Richard Burton was in. The reason he liked me was because Richard Burton wasn’t that tall, and, well, neither am I! But I didn’t get it. But these were big directors, I was impressed that they even answered! I found out from James Earl Jones about a year or so after that who had gotten that part. It turned out that Cicely Tyson got it! I said, “Well, that makes sense!” [*laughs*]

How were you making a living while living in Paris?

I was able to sustain myself performing. I signed a guest artist contract with the Béjart Company. So I would go back and forth [between US and France]. And I did television stuff— little commercial things, you know, da, da, da [*gestures exuberantly with hands*]!

I worked with one guy, Arthur Pléchard, who took the company to Portugal one summer for six to eight weeks. We were performing at night in casinos. I had never done anything like that before. He had adapted his concert ballets to commercial casino stuff. That was a lot of fun. At midnight, we would do the nightclub, which was the more intimate version. I have pictures; it was fun, all the feathers and stuff....

Where did you live in Paris?

On the Rue Mazarine, in the 6th, near St. Germain. Then I moved to a housing development for artists in the 20th, near Père Lachaise. That was like an Arab quarter, which now is Arab, African, Chinese....

Did you enjoy your time in Paris?

Oh, yeah! It was like being in New York to me. It was a city, but in another language. And it was older, and people had a sense of compassion because of their experiences with the war and the occupation, that sort of thing. So I loved it. I still know some of the people I knew there. One of them is now very famous, Jean-Paul Goude, who is a photographer.

Where was your dance career at this point?

Well, I went to the Olympics with the Béjart Company. And then I came home. And after being in New York for about a week, I ran into Alvin [Ailey]. He said, “So, what are you doing? I’m looking for a girl.” And that’s when I joined the company.

There seems to have been many fortuitous meetings on street corners. You joined the Alvin Ailey Company in 1968. At that point the company was ten years old. What was the atmosphere like in the company at the time?

Electric. It was absolutely electric. You know, I’d seen the very first performance of the company as a student. And I had certainly followed them. I’d seen them in London when I was there. But when I saw them in Copenhagen, I saw how certain works had really crystallized.

Seeing them had made me a little homesick. So much was happening in dance in America at that time. And, you know, funding was available, companies were able to really exist and not just subsist. It was a very, very exciting time. I can remember being in Paris and seeing the Merce Cunningham Company, and enjoying it thoroughly, and also Paul Taylor. Just inhaling that stuff, and feeling kind of homesick, because there wasn’t that kind of dance community or dance expression in France at the time. And I wasn’t exactly the pioneering type. I didn’t necessarily want to choreograph and start my own movement system, I wasn’t the person to do that in France.

Any major early challenges that you faced?

Oh, racism. You know, in auditioning for a lot of those Broadway shows at the time, you wondered why you didn't get the parts, but you knew kind of why you didn't get it...

What about an early triumph?

I think being recognized for your work in the field. It's not like I would sit and wonder if I would get awards, but when it came, you really felt, "Oh wow!" I feel very honored and fortunate and privileged to have participated in the lives of some of the greatest dancers out there. To have people say, "Remember when you told me..." I usually don't remember... but that I said it, and that they remembered it, and that it helped them.

Do you remember what it was like the first time you stood on stage and performed?

It was so quick! I had a couple of movements and I was off. My father came to that performance and I asked him, "What did you think?" And he said, "It was quick." *[laughs]*

It was never unusual for me to work for nothing, or to work for something. It depended on the situation. All of those dues paying things that you did. And, of course, always taking classes. Always finding out what you needed to do to be the best.

But, joining the Ailey Company, as I sit here now, in the next century, in this building... I asked Judi [Judith Jamison], I said, "Judi, did you ever think at that time of where we would be at this juncture?" She said, "No!" Because we were too busy doing! It's not that we weren't future oriented. We were too busy creating the future.

But it was exciting. It was exciting because the Ailey Company was always a company that had a spiritual connection to its audience. And it was exciting being on that stage and having the audiences responding the way that they did. It was exciting being on the world stage and having audiences responding the way that they did. Alvin was really accessible to his dancers, he was generous, there was just a humanizing thing about him. And it did feel like a family, as it grew and grew and grew.

How long did you dance with the Ailey Company before you left to become the Artistic Director of Ailey II, when it was created?

Eight years. In 1975, I stopped. I still danced after, a little bit. But by the time Alvin offered me this, [to be the artistic director of Ailey II], I had started a family.

It's hard to tour with a child.

Well, yes. It got harder and harder. He [her son] did tour with me quite a bit, and it was very difficult. On him, and on me. because then you are very split, because you have to be the mother and you have to be the artist. And then, without him, you're still very split, you're in anguish.

When Alvin approached me about doing this, it took me exactly overnight to decide to do it. He was almost apologetic about it. He didn't want me to stop dancing, it was rather abrupt. But, at the same time, it just seemed like a transitional solution.

Did you miss dancing?

Well, no. My life was so full. I really did believe in working with younger dancers and helping to develop that.

Becoming a mentor, and a teacher, and the role as artistic director where you are sort of holding everything together—

It was very daunting! It was very daunting at first. But, I'd had my experience and many, many resources to inform me from my own schooling that had really shaped my ideas about what a dancer needed; I had certain ideas about building a dancer, and building a young company— we hadn't even started touring at that point. But we had started performing for audiences, doing outreach. We were performing in prisons, in hospitals, for that community who can't get to performances.

It was great to see that they responded just like any other audience. They clapped in the same places, they laughed in the same places. To realize how much of yourself you can give to others, to help them through whatever it is they need in their life, and that connection through the arts.

You said that the first time you went to Juilliard you were mesmerized by the place. I am sure that young people coming into this building (the Ailey School on 55th Street) now get that same feeling.

Yes. I'm always seeing dancers around and they say, "Ms. Waters this, Ms. Waters that..." I'm not used to being called Ms. Waters! But I'm getting used to it.

How does it feel?

It feels fantastic. What an incredible, incredible legacy that Alvin left. And I understand more and more and more of what he wanted and what he strove for every day. You don't forget that, you try to hold onto that. And I try to share as much of everything that he said and did with the dancers that I work with.

Do you have advice for aspiring dancers?

Don't give up. Be receptive and responsive to all the information that is given to you by your teachers and your choreographers. And just always keep your sights on what it is you think it is you want. You are the center of your universe. As Alvin use to say, "You are the most unique person." You have to have that sense of ego. Dancers have that, even as vulnerable as they are, and as fragile as it is, you have to have a sense of self esteem, a sense of your artistry. And, as always, nothing is worth having if you don't have to work for it. If it's easy, be suspicious.

It's not easy. There was one teacher— I don't know what my particular complaint was, whatever I was saying— but she said, "Well, just know, that it never gets easier." And I have always remembered that it doesn't. Because it is absolutely true. Alvin would say, "You are only as good as your last performance." And that was so scary! [*laughs*].

It seems like things kept falling into place in a way, from your friend taking you to Juilliard, to meeting Alvin Ailey on the street, almost like— dare I say it?— fate.

And I found out much later that my mother, as a young person, had auditioned for Katherine Dunham. And she got the job! She didn't take the job because she had just gotten married to my father and she couldn't tour. And I never knew that. I was well into my adulthood and career when I learned that.

Maybe that explains why your mother was supportive of your choice to pursue dance?

I think so. I think she understood. She was much quieter and shyer and timid than me. Last year, finally, I asked her, when she was 93, "When you auditioned for Dunham, what did she have you do?" She thought about it, then she said, "Ballet, something." Just "ballet, something," off-hand like that! [*laughs*] I always thought, maybe that was the link I never knew about.

Images courtesy of the artist. Portrait of Sylvia Waters by Eduardo Patino.

Note:

Ailey II's 2011 New York season opens April 6-17 at The Ailey Citigroup Theater!

Ailey II's 12 rising stars will take the stage in their home theater April 6-17 for 14 exciting performances of new works and repertory favorites. Premieres will include Robert Moses' *Doscongio*, Kyle Abraham's *The Corner*, and Donald Byrd's *Shards*.

The Company's two-week New York season will also feature three repertory favorites: *Valse*, by former Ailey School student Sidra Bell, Thang Dao's *Echoes* and *Proximity by Carlos dos Santos*. Led by Artistic Director Sylvia Waters since its inception in 1974, Ailey II is at the peak of its popularity, winning rave reviews and regularly selling out performances all over the world.