

## Lessons from the Field

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Foundation

New York, NY

Michael M. Kaiser, 2005

*In 1991 it appeared that the company founded by Alvin Ailey in 1954 was in jeopardy. With a deficit of over \$1.5 million, the world's largest African-American cultural institution was near bankruptcy. An overhaul of the board of directors and a major institutional marketing campaign were largely responsible for its successful revival.*

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In 1990, I was asked to become Executive Director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Foundation, an incredibly exciting prospect for me. I had worked with Alvin in Kansas City and was a huge fan of his work. Alvin had died eight months earlier at a tragically young age. The company, under the new Artistic Director, Judith Jamison, was in deep distress. While the artistic product was still strong (and, with Judith's energy, getting stronger after a period of decline during Alvin's illness), the financial situation was dire. The company had a deficit of over \$1.5 million and was suffering from the typical effects of cash shortages: missed payrolls, low morale and ineffective fundraising. Judith had been running the Ailey company for almost a year. It had been a baptism of fire. While she had a firm idea of how she wanted the company to perform artistically, she had been buffeted by the tremendous financial problems and many of her artistic initiatives could not be implemented given the financial constraints. She was frustrated.

During my interviews for this job, several Board members expressed frustration at the financial woes of the organization. They could not understand why an organization that earned over 70% of its budget from ticket sales and tour fees should be in such trouble. They argued that it is generally considered a good thing for an arts organization to earn a large portion of its budget since it indicates substantial public appeal and a degree of control over one's own future: the organization is not reliant on contributed funds.

This was one instance where statistics can be misleading. The Ailey company was only earning such a large proportion of its budget because its fundraising was so inadequate. The largest modern dance ensemble in the world (and the largest African-American cultural institution in the world) was raising only \$1.7 million dollars a year. This was only twice what the much smaller Kansas City Ballet was raising when I arrived there in 1985. I knew we could do better and said so at my interviews. Some Board members were skeptical and believed Ailey was raising all the money it could and that the only solution was to close Ailey's venerable school and its junior company. I had yet to have all the facts but I knew they had to be wrong. Reducing the artistic and educational scope of the organization could not be the only way to create health.

The Board felt it would be better if I started after the company's New York season ended, on January 1, 1991. They believed that replacing the incumbent before the season's end would unsettle the company and the press. In retrospect, I would have preferred to start earlier since, once the decision had been made, Judith and others began to look to me for decisions. Even before I started officially, I was involved in several Ailey activities that gave me some insight into the world I was entering. The first was the opening night gala for the company. The Ailey

company mounts an annual one month season in New York City, at City Center. The Opening Night of the season is always used as a fundraising event for the organization.

The invitation for the gala included a long list of famous African Americans who formed the Honorary Committee for the event, everyone from Michael Jordan to Bill Cosby. I was looking forward to meeting all of these luminaries. At the event, not one member of the Honorary Committee appeared. I was disappointed, as I am sure were many of those who had paid up to \$1000 per ticket to attend. I decided then and there that I would never advertise luminaries who were not going to appear; it simply was not fair.

A few days after the gala, I learned that Ailey was to participate in a National Arts Stabilization Fund (NASF) program designed to support minority arts organizations in New York City. The NASF was a Ford Foundation spin-off that worked to build stronger balance sheets for arts organizations. Each participating organization could receive a major grant if it achieved rigorous financial goals. I had worked on an NASF project in Kansas City before coming to Ailey and knew this was a challenging process. I was asked to attend a meeting, before I started work, to review the program and discuss key issues. The meeting ended with our promise to provide all of the necessary documents to NASF to begin the consultation process. I, more than anyone in the room from Ailey, understood what a long road we were about to navigate.

The most troubling issue I faced prior to my joining Ailey centered on the salaries for our technical staff. I received a phone call from Judith just before Christmas asking me to see her backstage at City Center. When I arrived, she said that the crew demanded salary increases if they were to go on the forthcoming tour throughout the United States.

They deserved the raises (the Ailey crew is the hardest working group I have ever encountered) and she wanted me to get the Board to approve the raises despite the wage freeze imposed by the Board as a response to the current fiscal crisis. She asked me to talk with Calvin Hunt, our Production Stage Manager who ran the crew. Calvin explained the problem of keeping crew at Ailey, given the relatively low salaries and the very intense workload. The forthcoming tour had a good deal of “one-nighters,”—one-day stops that were the hardest on the crew. He was not sure his crew would stay if no salary increases were given.

I was certain he was right and I also believed that wage freezes were not the answer to cash problems. It seemed to me that most organizations in trouble get that way because they react to an initial financial problem inappropriately. When any financial problem emerges, the first reaction of most Boards and staff is to reduce expenditures. The easiest expenses to cut are the most discretionary areas of spending: artistic ventures and marketing. No one has to be fired to make these cutbacks. However, when arts organizations cancel marketing and artistic initiatives, they begin to lose the interest of their supporters, both donors and audience members. As a result, less revenue is received and further cutbacks are made. This begins a vicious downward spiral that cripples arts organizations.

The Ailey company was in this situation. It had cut back on new productions and so ticket sales in New York were down. Contributions were always relatively low. Freezing wages was an approach I call “saving one’s way to health,” an approach I have yet to see work. I believe, rather, in marshalling resources, creating exciting new ventures, marketing them aggressively

and using new funds to reinvest in additional important projects. It was a different approach than the Board was taking, but I did not see how they were going to reestablish fiscal health simply by holding salaries constant. (Many Board members believed that the only answer for the company was for Bill Cosby to donate one million dollars. He had made it clear that he would give nothing until we had cleaned ourselves up. But they still hoped.)

I called the Ailey Chairman, Harold Levine, and explained the situation to him. He said immediately, "you are the boss, do what you think is right." I was relieved and happily called both Calvin and Judith with the news. I was an instant hero with both of them and the entire crew and that allowed me to start work in the best of fashions.

My first day of work, January 2, 1991, was one of those icy, stormy days in New York City. When I arrived, chilled to the bone, I was greeted by an emergency. We had been booked to go to Athens on tour in September, but our presenter at the Tivoli in Copenhagen thought he had been promised the same week. By coincidence his name was also Mr. Kaiser. So my first act as Executive Director of Alvin Ailey was to call Mr. Kaiser and tell him that another Mr. Kaiser was canceling the Ailey tour stop to Copenhagen. He was livid and called me every name in the book (except Kaiser). It was an inauspicious first day at the office.

After dealing with Mr. Kaiser I met with my staff. As is typical in turnaround situations, they were quite suspicious of this new boss. What programs would I cut to balance the books? Was I a tool of the Board? Who would be the first to go? Would I bring in my own team? Since, in my approach, my first impulse is to build programming rather than to slash budgets, I have ready, reassuring answers to these questions. I also do not bring in my friends but prefer to work with those who know the organization best. I am a planner and want my staff to feel they have input to the future direction of the organization. For most people this is an attractive environment in which to work. For a few it is more responsibility than they enjoy. This latter group rarely remains for long.

After the crew salary victory, Judith, of course, was on my side and was a huge help. The relationship between the Artistic Director and Executive Director in any arts organization is immensely important. If the two work well together, if they trust each other's expertise, the organization has to benefit. If there is mistrust, the organization is certain to fail. I believe that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the responsibility for most of the failures to establish a strong relationship between the two leaders falls with the executive.

Many people, especially Board members with corporate backgrounds, are quick to point fingers at artistic leaders who, they believe, do not understand fiscal realities. I, however, believe that many administrators take an arrogant attitude *vis-à-vis* their artistic partners and act as if they were parents disciplining a spoiled child. In the end, the only important products of an arts organization are its artistic and educational programming, not the health of its balance sheet. Executives who spend all of their time saying what cannot be afforded rather than finding ways to achieve the visions of their artistic directors are not doing their jobs well.

My focus on increasing revenue, building the artistic and educational programming, and marketing more aggressively makes it easier for artistic leaders to trust me. When I fought for the crew salaries at Ailey, I was demonstrating to Judith, and the rest of the organization, that I

was not going to try to “save our way to health.” I believe that Judith would agree that my work was directed at helping her get done what she wanted.

Sometimes trust can result from a lucky coincidence. Judith walked into my office one day asking if I could get the Ailey company on the “Jumbotron,” a huge television screen placed high atop Times Square. I explained that the Jumbotron was owned by Sony and we would have to get them to agree to put a film clip of the Ailey organization on the screen. I was not optimistic since the Jumbotron was used for advertising and I was certain that the cost would be immense. But I agreed to follow up. Literally ten minutes after Judith left my office the phone rang; it was the Department of Cultural Affairs for the City of New York asking whether we would be interested in having the Ailey company featured on the Jumbotron! Sony was donating time to the City and we were on the list to be contacted. I marched into Judith’s office and told her of the coincidence. She, I think, thought I was being modest. In any event, we ended up on the Jumbotron every hour for a week. I will never know whether or not it had a marketing impact but I do know it cemented my relationship with Judith.

One of Judith’s dreams was to remount the Ailey work, *The Mooche*. It was a very lavish ballet that required a huge investment in sets and costumes. It had been programmed and then cancelled the season before I joined Ailey. I promised Judith we would do it one day. But we had to wait. I have found that the best way to work with artistic directors is to let them name their priorities, and then propose a schedule for achieving them. The best artistic directors have a host of dreams; rarely can they all be achieved immediately. But I have yet to find an artistic director who takes the short-term view. I find them much more patient than most administrators.

But, to be honest, re-mounting *The Mooche* seemed like a distant prospect at that time.

It would be difficult to overestimate the problems faced by the Ailey organization at the time of my arrival. There simply was no cash. We owed a great deal to vendors, especially the contractor who had recently refurbished the Ailey offices and studios. Our fundraising effort was overly reliant on a few donors, yet these donors were rightly concerned that the company was always one step away from bankruptcy. The Board was tired and depressed and the dancers were angry.

In addition, Judith, who had come back to run the Ailey company, was frustrated. She had been running her own small company, the Jamison Project, which gave her the freedom to do what she wanted artistically within the constraints of the available resources. She had choreographed several works for the Jamison Project (my favorite was *Forgotten Time*, a rich, vibrant work set to the music of *Les Mysteres de Voix Bulgare*) and had assembled a strong group of dancers.

Before Alvin died, he asked Judith to become the new Artistic Director of the Ailey company. Given her history with the organization and Alvin’s role in her career, Judith could not refuse. In negotiating to engage Judith, the Ailey Board agreed to hire several of her dancers and to pay off any outstanding debts that the Jamison Project had incurred. A year later, those debts had not been paid and Judith felt that a promise had not been kept. She was also frustrated by the inability of the organization to meet her artistic needs. Who could blame her?

Judith was completely faithful to Alvin's vision for the company. He wanted his own works to be performed. But, even from the very first performance by the Ailey company in 1958, he featured the work of other choreographers as well. Judith wanted to include Alvin's works, works by the choreographers that he had commissioned, as well as ballets by many of the younger choreographers working in the 1990s. This all took money and we had none.

The Ailey company had always been a touring company. The company had a four-week season in New York but also toured the United States and the rest of the world each year. When I arrived, the company was set to embark upon a fifteen-week tour of the United States. Looking at the tour schedule, however, it appeared that several of the weeks lost money since the tour was not well planned. There were too many days without performances, long distances between engagements, and fees that were too low. While it was too late to affect this tour, I quickly went to work with our agent from Columbia Artists to change our strategy for future tours. This change resulted in substantial improvements in future tour earnings.

The Ailey company gave me my first opportunity to experience the touring life. My first trip was to Baltimore just three weeks after I joined the organization. I had my own room, traveled from New York to Baltimore by myself (the dancers and crew left earlier to rehearse), ate meals by myself. I attended the very first performance of my tenure at Ailey in Baltimore. The performance was electric and the audience was ecstatic. After the show and a celebratory reception, I walked back to the hotel alone. Most of the dancers went out to dinner and to party in small groups but I felt like an outsider. I hardly knew the dancers and was both awed and frightened of them.

In fact, the only time I had met the dancers by the time I went to Baltimore was during the City Center season, before I started work. Judith introduced me after a matinee performance. I muttered a few bland words about the honor I felt to be working with them. I felt I had not performed well, but after my remarks Renee Robinson came up to me and said, "You have a nice aura. You will do well here." How I hoped she was right.

Calvin invited me to spend some time on the road with the crew. He realized that I would become more sensitive to the needs of the crew if I saw what their lives were like. I also appreciated that going on tour was the only way to get to know the dancers. Since they only performed and rehearsed in New York for less than fifteen weeks each year, I would not really get to know them unless I did some traveling.

After feeling so lonely in Baltimore, I was pleased to accept Calvin's offer to tour with the crew. My first tour was to Washington State where we performed in Seattle, Tacoma, and Yakima, a small town where Alvin's father was born.

As I mentioned, the Ailey crew works incredibly hard. The "normal" daily routine for them is to arrive at the theater before 8 a.m. They meet the local stagehands who help set up and run the show, but who typically have never seen the show before. The trucks arrive overnight. The crew unloads the sets, costumes, lighting equipment, dance floor and props, as well as a personal dance case for each dancer. While the stage managers set up the dressing rooms and place signs backstage for the dancers, who arrive in the afternoon for rehearsal, the crew begins to set up all of the equipment. This is hard and heavy work. The local crew helps get all of the equipment in

place but the Ailey crew works diligently, quickly, and with great spirit directing their efforts. By late morning, the floor is laid, the sets are hung, the costumes are sorted and ready for steaming and the lights are ready for focusing. During lunch, the soundman tries out his equipment for the first time. He has about twenty minutes of quiet time to get the balance right for the taped music.

After lunch, the final adjustments to lighting are made and the stage is readied for the dancers. They arrive for spacing rehearsals and, if time allows, more extensive rehearsals. After the rehearsal comes a dinner break, then everyone prepares for the show. The show will last up to two and half hours, after which the entire stage machinery has to be dismantled and placed back in the trucks. When this is completed (usually by midnight), the weary Ailey crew loads into the crew bus (a “rock star” type bus with beds and a lounge), has a drink, watches a video, gets some sleep and wakes up in the next city ready to do it all again. It is fun for a day or two; it is brutal for weeks on end.

But there are rewards. In the cities where we gave more than one performance, the crew has part of its days free and can enjoy sightseeing. The Ailey stage technicians see more of the world that way than any other performing arts crew. They also establish a *camaraderie*, the likes of which I have never experienced anywhere else.

This closeness was immensely important since we often faced unusual obstacles, especially on international tours. The trip to Israel was typical of an overseas Ailey tour. We opened in Tel Aviv at the Mann Auditorium. The Mann is a concert hall; we had to turn it into a dance theater in one day. We loaded in at night. We followed concert performances of *Aida* by the Israel Philharmonic conducted by Zubin Mehta. We stood in the wings, privately urging the maestro to seal the tomb so we could get started. Within 24 hours, the Mann looked like a theater with wings and proscenium arch, all created out of fabric. After a few very successful performances in Tel Aviv (the Israelis have always loved the Ailey company), we toured to Caesaria.

Caesaria is an ancient Roman amphitheatre on the Mediterranean. While the ground is dusty and the changing rooms filled with spiders and dirt, the setting at night is magic. We did our usual one-day load-in and then had a lovely dinner in the town overlooking the sea. The show was fantastic. The stars in the sky, the beautiful Mediterranean as backdrop and the ancient setting seemed especially appropriate for Alvin’s *Hidden Rites*, a series of pagan rituals.

We also performed in a small town a few miles from the Lebanese border. On the bus drive from Tel Aviv, Nasha Thomas, one of our dancers, read my horoscope. It was not encouraging, predicting a calamity for me that very day. For once, a newspaper horoscope was entirely accurate. This performance was a disaster from start to finish. The “theater” was a platform in a park erected for the Bolshoi Ballet several weeks before. In the meantime, the oil in the wood of the platform had migrated to the stage surface and the entire stage was as slippery as a sheet of ice. Our dancers were not happy and refused to perform those works on the program that required large leaps and spins. We told the sponsor the performance had to be shortened. When this was announced the crowd stormed the stage and we had to hide in the scorpion-infested basement that passed as a dressing room. One of our crew got so sick we sent him to the local hospital. When the dancers could be put into buses back to Tel Aviv, I was elected to wait until our sick friend returned from the hospital. I had no idea how I was going to get back to the hotel

and spent a few scary hours dodging the poisonous spiders. Still, I would not have missed the Israel tour for anything.

Each tour was different but each was memorable in its own way. We traveled to Japan, Copenhagen, Cologne, Boston, Seattle, Los Angeles and on and on. So many experiences are engraved in my memory. Performing in the Herod Atticus at the base of the Acropolis in Greece was so special. Opening night was threatened by rain at this out-of-doors venue. Dozens of Greek women tried to dry the stage with rolls of toilet paper, quite a sight. When the performance was over, we celebrated in a Greek *taverna*. A host of Ailey crew and dancers drank wine, ate Greek delicacies and sang show tunes. Even Judith came and gave renditions of the score of *King and I* that she had performed in high school; only a warning from the local police broke up the party.

Tours to London and Paris were also special. We performed for two weeks in London at the Coliseum. The trip did not begin auspiciously. When we arrived, we found that an advertising campaign for the Ailey visit featured someone we did not know. It was an attractive black man, stripped to the waist and smiling. Who was he? We only found out the next day that the marketing director of the Coliseum had decided he did not like our photos and hired a model. We all, especially Judith, were livid. But the engagement was a big success and the audiences went wild. A particular highlight for me was the Company's performances of *The River* with live music.

The Ailey company almost always performed to taped music and hearing the London orchestra play the piece was a revelation. The Duke Ellington music was inspired and lush and diverse and we all were so excited at those performances.

Paris was even more special since we were performing in the Palais Garnier. We were all awed by the grandeur of the theater, the Chagall ceiling and the remarkable rehearsal studio backstage. The Garnier stage is raked; the floor slants so the audience has a better view. This is not uncommon in Europe but does not exist in the U.S. where dancers are used to performing on a level floor. On opening night, our first ballet was *Shards* by Donald Byrd. As the dancers performed the opening movement and raised their legs in unison, those of us off-stage could see them sliding down to the front of the stage! But once again, the company came through and the audiences were ecstatic.

Of all the tour dates I experienced at Ailey, however, the most moving was not in a major world capital but in Opelika, Alabama. We performed in a high school auditorium. It was not an impressive building. But the audience was remarkably diverse, half black and half white. After the show, most of the audience (and the company and crew) headed to Denny's for ice cream and pie. The spirit of excitement and fellowship in the restaurant was remarkable. I have to believe that Alvin was smiling down upon us all and saying, "that is what I wanted my company to do."

At every tour stop, Ailey's seminal work, *Revelations*, was the audience favorite. And with good reason. *Revelations* uses deceptively simple movements and familiar spirituals to communicate a wide range of emotions and events. I saw literally hundreds of performances during my tenure at Ailey and have never tired of it. The dancers, and artistic leaders, of course, would hope that audiences were as enthusiastic about other works in the repertory. Alvin even tried to eliminate

the work from an entire New York season but was not successful. Audiences love this ballet and demand it; I knew it sold tickets. We would sell about 50% more tickets to performances with *Revelations* than those without it. As we completed planning for each season, I would have an annual “negotiation” with Judith about the number of performances of *Revelations*. My guess is that these negotiations continue to this day.

While touring was at the heart of the company’s activities, my work was primarily in New York City. As always, I initiated my tenure by developing a strategic plan with the Board and the staff.

The planning process was not simple to implement. We started with a full-day Board retreat to review the mission of the organization. It was a difficult meeting. Like many artistic directors, Judith had a very clear idea of what she wanted the company to be. Despite her tremendous skills as an orator, however, she was not comfortable putting her vision into words. She wanted the Board to watch the stage and discern her intentions. They found this difficult. In the end, we all agreed to a mission statement. I was charged with assembling a small committee to develop a plan to achieve this mission.

I began by interviewing Board members, staff and artists. This was an enlightening process. In a troubled organization without any cash, everyone is frustrated. No one has the resources to do what they want and too much time is wasted coveting what other departments have. I had to develop a plan that would demonstrate how each area of the organization could work together to create new financial resources.

The Ailey plan focused on fundraising. The high level of earned income suggested that we needed to attract a substantially higher level of contributed funds. I was sure it could be done. Judith was right: if you looked at the stage you saw this amazing group of dancers thrilling audiences around the world every night. This had to be exploitable. We simply needed to get our message out and to organize a much more aggressive fundraising effort.

While many, many people knew the name Ailey, they were not really clear about the merits of the organization and what it stood for. This fact became extremely clear to me when we received dozens of letters of condolence on the passing of Alex Hailey, the author of *Roots*. Many members of the public thought Alex Hailey and Alvin Ailey were one and the same person. We clearly had an institutional marketing problem.

Building a strong institutional image takes time. By the end of 1993, I think we were there. The events we created from December 1992 to December 1993 remain a textbook illustration of a meaningful institutional marketing effort.

In December 1992, the Ailey company was featured on a full episode of “The Donahue Show,” at that time the premiere daytime chat show. Phil Donahue and his staff created a remarkable opportunity for us. We worked for 18 months with his producers to sell them on the concept: the dancers would perform excerpts from the repertory on the (very small) stage and Judith would discuss her career and the importance of the Ailey company. Devoting a full hour to one performing arts group was most unusual for a ratings-conscious network.

The day of the taping was extraordinarily exciting. The company had virtually no rehearsal time on the postage-stamp sized stage and we did not even see Mr. Donahue until the taping so there was an electric feel to it all. Most members of the studio audience had never seen the company before and were enthralled. Judith sparkled. Phil was entranced. It was a magic event that was viewed by 18 million Americans. It was the largest audience ever to see the company. No other dance company had ever had this kind of exposure before. It started a buzz.

The month before the show was aired, Bill Clinton had been elected President for his first term. As soon as he was elected, I talked with Ken Brody, our Board member who was closest to the Clinton campaign (and was to leave us to become President of the Import-Export Bank), about the gala to be held the night before the inauguration. Could the Ailey company perform? He put me in touch with Rahm Emmanuel, head of the inauguration committee, who got me to the gala producer. I made a complete nuisance of myself trying to get us on that show. Eventually my calls, faxes, videotape deliveries, etc. paid off. The Ailey company was the only not-for-profit performing arts group invited to perform at Clinton's inaugural gala in January of 1993.

The performance was to be broadcast, with a two-hour tape delay, by CBS. I knew viewership would be high so I had the producing team promise (in writing) that we would appear on television. This promise became quite important.

The two days in Washington, D.C. were magical. Since the inaugural committee had limited funds and the expenses they were covering were small, we had to go "on the cheap." Judith drove Calvin and me down to Washington in her rented car. I sat in the back with all of the costumes and props for *Revelations* on my lap. You could barely see me through the stools, fans and hats.

We stayed at a small, unimpressive motel since every hotel room in Washington was booked for the inauguration. The motel was near the arena where the gala would be held. Rehearsals were set for Sunday, a dress rehearsal for an audience (of 20,000) was scheduled on Monday, and the gala was on Tuesday. The performers included Michael Jackson, Barbra Streisand, Bill Cosby, Aretha Franklin, Fleetwood Mac, Warren Beatty, Michael Bolton, Goldie Hawn, Jack Lemmon, Sally Fields, Judy Collins, and on, and on.

When we arrived, the stage managers thought the Ailey dancers were a "back-up" act and asked us not to sit in the Green Room. I explained (in a loud voice) that the Ailey dancers were artists and we did not do "back up." We sat in the Green Room with pride.

Watching each of these great performers rehearse, chatting with them backstage and witnessing the excitement of my dancers were all equally thrilling. Meeting Barbra Streisand was a highlight. Judith had met her at an Academy of Achievement awards ceremony and introduced us. Barbra had not done much public singing in a long while (this gala preceded her comeback tour) and was nervous but she was tremendously gracious to me. She held my hand, drank coffee and talked. The entire Ailey company, knowing of my great esteem for this performer, stood in a circle around us and watched!

Michael Bolton was extremely pleasant. We stood together during most of the performance. Aretha Franklin was very funny. She could not find a graceful way of relaxing in her very large

gown before her performance and draped herself over the President's limousine. Michael Jackson sat in his private trailer surrounded by his minders and did not say a word to anyone. Macaulay Culkin got lost in the large arena and missed his entrance at the dress rehearsal. It was typical theater but with a remarkable cast.

After the dress rehearsal, with an audience composed of people who had contributed to the Clinton campaign and had won seats by lottery, it was clear that the entire show could not be televised. It was simply too long. I went into high gear making sure that our contract was honored, that the Ailey company must appear on television. Ultimately the promise was kept and the Ailey dancers were viewed by 88 million people. But other performers, including an all-star jazz ensemble, were cut and the press howled.

On the evening of the performance, we were kept in an area adjacent to the door through which the Clintons would enter. Many celebrities arrived, from Roseanne to President Carter. But Mr. and Mrs. Clinton were nowhere in sight. We waited and waited. The television people sweated; they had only a two-hour cushion between the live performance and the broadcast and they needed that time to make the cuts required.

The Clintons arrived over an hour late and the program began. I stood a few feet behind the President-elect. The performance went brilliantly and I was so proud of my dancers. The Clintons seemed to enjoy the excerpts from *Revelations*. During the finale, with Fleetwood Mac singing "Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow," the Ailey dancers were up on stage with the entire gala cast. Several of my dancers wormed their way next to the President-elect. In every press photo the Ailey dancers were front and center in their yellow *Revelations* costumes.

The impact on the organization, coming one month after "The Donahue Show" was huge. But we were not done. The previous year I had worked with the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center to mount an exhibition on the history of the Ailey company. The original reason for mounting the exhibition was simple: I wanted to have something to show donors in New York even when the company was on tour. We only performed for four weeks a year in New York yet most of our contributors were local. What could I show donors that would impress them when we were not performing? The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts has a rich and varied exhibition program; each major exhibition is developed with great care and mounted for several months. This seemed like an ideal place to showcase the Ailey legacy.

Rob Marx, the Director of the Library at that time, was very receptive to the proposal I sent to him in my first few weeks at Ailey. He asked me to meet with Barbara Stratynier, the Curator of Exhibitions at the Library, and Madeleine Nichols, the Dance Curator. Barbara and Madeline agreed that Barbara would take the lead on this exhibition and she and I began to work.

Barbara is a wonder. She knows more about dance history than anyone I have ever met and in her professional, understated way gets huge amounts accomplished. She and I worked very well together on the Ailey exhibition that we named "Body and Soul." Working on the exhibition became a passion. We uncovered so many wonderful objects, photographs, costumes and memorabilia that told the history of the Ailey company.

We took a tour of the Ailey warehouse in Yonkers and found a treasure trove. We found a box filled with Alvin's honorary degrees; it was a big bulging filing cabinet and was tangible proof of the esteem in which he was held. We had original costumes from *Blues Suite*, Alvin's first ballet for his company, and *Revelations*, photos of virtually every Ailey dancer and dance, costume sketches by Romare Bearden, and the single most interesting object, a tour scrapbook kept by an early Ailey dancer, Minnie Marshall, during an international tour in the 1960s. The scrapbook had pictures, programs, souvenirs and even CIA briefing papers for the trip to Southeast Asia. It told so much about the roots and personality of this Company.

"Body and Soul" was a big success and one of the highlights of my career. I will always remember bringing Lula Cooper, Alvin's mother, to the exhibition. When she entered the room and saw his huge portrait hanging over the large exhibition gallery she burst into tears. A moment later she asked, "Where is my picture? There would be no Alvin Ailey without me!" Indeed Lula Cooper was right on several counts. Not only did she give birth to Alvin, she also owned his name and the rights to all of his ballets. We spent over two years negotiating the purchase of these rights from her; the Board and I believed the company should control Alvin's works. Lula did not make things easy but we finally purchased the rights and the Alvin Ailey repertory will be preserved in perpetuity.

The Ailey exhibition was so strong that we organized a tour. The final stop was the Anacostia Branch of the Smithsonian Institution. So in March 1993, two months after the Clinton gala, "Body and Soul" opened in Washington, D.C.

In July of that year we gave a free performance in New York's Central Park. This performance, underwritten by Philip Morris, was a celebration of the sponsor's 35 years of giving to the arts and the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Ailey organization. It was a huge venture and not inexpensive, but I know that Philip Morris felt it got more than its money's worth from this project. I believe that many corporations do not enjoy the full impact of their arts sponsorship by underwriting projects too small to attract press attention. If a corporation is willing to focus on fewer, larger projects, they can create far more visibility for their products and services. Over a two-year period, I worked with the Philip Morris staff to develop the Central Park event. In the end, over 25,000 people came to enjoy this free performance and many, many more learned about it from the media coverage it received. CNN ran spots on the concert 24 times during the day of the event and *The New York Daily News* ran a full-page picture celebrating the event,

The performance also gave us an opportunity to show our major donors that huge numbers of people, from all backgrounds, cared about the work we did. The crowd was so big we feared for the safety of those within the walls of "Summerspace" in Central Park. We had erected large screens outside of these walls for the "overflow." People lined up for hours to see the performance and many thousands more were watching outside of the walls. Yet you could hear a pin drop during Jawole Zollar's *Shelter*. It was astonishing.

In September of that year we received permission from the City of New York to change the name of West 61st Street, where our studios resided, to "Alvin Ailey Place." The ceremony, when the new street sign was unveiled, was very moving.

In November of 1993, two books on the Ailey organization were published. The first was Judith's autobiography, *Dancing Spirit*. Judith had worked on this book for a full year with a co-author, Howard Kaplan. The volume was edited by Mrs. Onassis; this gave me a second opportunity to work with this great lady. In preparation for her role as editor, Mrs. Onassis came to several Ailey performances.

The second book was a series of photographs of the Ailey company taken by Jack Mitchell. Jack had a unique relationship with the Ailey company that spanned most of its 35-year history. His photographs told the history of the company in pictures, echoing the exhibition Barbara and I had curated the year before.

The finale to this remarkable year was the opening night gala of our 35th anniversary season. The performance featured the world premiere of Judith's wonderful ballet, *Hymn*, that told the story of the Ailey dancers through their own words. Anna Deavere Smith, who had had great success in her one-woman shows, worked with Judith to create this work. Both of them performed in the premiere; it was spectacular. The gala also featured a performance of *Revelations* with Al Jarreau, Dionne Warwick and Jessye Norman as vocal soloists. Phylicia Rashad narrated a film about Alvin, Maya Angelou read a poem in Alvin's honor, and Denzel Washington hosted the entire evening. It was a fitting climax to the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations and to my tenure at the company.

Each of the events described here were meaningful. Taken as a group, "The Donahue Show," the Clinton gala, the Smithsonian opening, the Central Park performance, the street naming, the books and the 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Gala, redefined the Ailey company as the hottest and sexiest dance organization of the time. This new institutional image allowed the company to double its fundraising (and reduce its earned income percentage!) and to meet the requirements of the NASF challenge. By the middle of 1993, the company had completely erased its historic deficit, without closing the school or the Repertory Ensemble, and was ready for a period of great health and vitality.

Too many arts institutions believe that strong fundraising results from charming and professional fundraisers. When the money does not flow, they blame the staff. The staff usually blames the Board, wishing they had given more or had wealthier contacts. The truth is that the usual culprit is the absence of a dynamic marketing program that conveys the excitement of a thriving artistic program. Following the high visibility events of 1993 it was much easier to fundraise for the Ailey company.

This did not mean that great fundraising skill was not an important asset. We would not have doubled the fundraising at Ailey in 1993 without the determination and skill of Sharon Luckman. I hired Sharon as Director of Development and it was the single best hire of my entire career. Sharon brought fierce determination and loyalty to the Ailey organization. She has gone on to serve as Executive Director of the Ailey organization since 1995 and has done a brilliant job. Her skills as a fundraiser have played an historic role in the success of the organization.

The Ailey company, like many other culturally-specific arts organizations, received far more funding from foundations and government agencies than from individual donors. The exact opposite is true for mainstream Euro-centric arts organizations. Minority arts organizations

typically do not serve audiences that have substantial resources to contribute. However, Sharon and I both believed that the Ailey organization was an exception and that there was more money available from individuals. We developed “Ailey Partners” as a result. The concept was very simple. If one gave \$1,000 as an annual contribution, one received a series of benefits. The extra attraction was that we promised to run a full-page *New York Times* advertisement when we reached 100 Ailey Partners. The names of each Partner would be included in the ad. We printed, on newsprint, a sample ad that showed how a donor’s name would appear and included it with the solicitation package. Dozens of new or increased contributions were received within weeks of the mailing.

I believe Ailey Partners worked because the *quid pro quo* was so clear. This is essential in fundraising. I have always observed that Board members are happier selling gala tickets than raising unrestricted funds. Why? Because the *quid pro quo* is so easy to explain. It feels less like begging to sell a gala ticket or table than to ask for money for operations since the donor is “purchasing” a clear benefit. In every organization I have run, I have tried to create programs like Ailey Partners where the “package” is clear, easy to explain, and presented in the form of an invitation. I have found much more willingness of Board members to participate in this form of fundraising.

A great deal of the increased visibility and funding enjoyed by the Ailey company is a direct result of the celebrity of Judith Jamison. Judith has an amazing ability to convey thoughts and ideas to an audience. She truly commands any stage on which she stands. We were able to give her many platforms, from “The Donahue Show” to the Sara Lee Awards, to press interviews too numerous to mention. Alvin knew what he was doing when he selected Judith to replace him; she had the strength of character and the determination to build upon what he had established.

This is not to say that Judith and I always agreed with each other. I very much wanted to see the Ailey company build on the success of 1993 by mounting a major retrospective festival of African-American choreography. Judith disagreed. She was sensitive to the classification of the Ailey company as a black dance company; she wanted the company to be perceived as a great dance company. Period. I could understand her frustration. When the company appeared in Germany, the posters announced the company was “direct from Harlem.” I understood Judith’s desire to be viewed amongst the great dance companies of the world, but I still believed the festival would have been a major contribution to the dance world and to dance audiences. (And I was able to stage the festival, with Judith’s great help, in the 2004/2005 season at the Kennedy Center.)

By the time this idea was conceived, the Ailey organization had changed radically. We had eliminated our deficit, we were touring more efficiently, our national and international image had developed substantially and there were more funds available for artistic initiatives. Any organization that undergoes this much change inevitably sees some staff turnover as well. Some people just can not adapt to a new culture and the Ailey organization was certainly adopting a new culture.

In addition to hiring Sharon, I hired a new Marketing Director and a new General Manager during my three-year tenure. The interview process for the marketing position was depressing. It was clear to me that not many people thought of marketing as I did; the focus was simply on

the prettiest brochure or the nicest advertisement. I wanted someone who could appreciate and implement my ideas on institutional marketing.

The person I wanted to hire I simply could not afford. In my search I heard about Bob Pontarelli, who had been doing marketing at ABT for 13 years. Bob had lived through the entire Baryshnikov era at ABT and was rumored to be unhappy with his current situation. Bob came to see me after I called him and we had an amazing conversation. Here was someone who truly “got it.” He talked about how he wanted to do big projects, how they changed the perception of the public, how they affected a company. He talked about Judith and likened her to Mikhail Baryshnikov. Both had huge media presence. (Not coincidentally they danced together in Ailey’s *Pas de Duke*, a *pas de deux* set, of course, to an Ellington score.)

Unfortunately, Bob was earning more at ABT than I was at Ailey and we simply could not afford him. We were to reunite and work together several years later but it was a first meeting I would not forget.

The ‘search’ for a new General Manager was more straightforward. Calvin Hunt had impressed me from the beginning, the day we discussed the problem with crew salaries. He had the knowledge of the organization, the experience of work on the road, and the commitment to the Ailey company that was required for this challenging task.

Calvin was the only African-American in a senior administrative post at Ailey. This was clearly not appropriate. I struggled with ways to bring more black people into arts administration. It simply was not a very attractive career option for many people. Salaries are typically low, as is job security. For those coming from less affluent families, it was hardly the way to establish a strong financial base. I was to grapple with this question for many years. The “Make-a-Ballet” program I created at ABT, a program that introduced teens to backstage careers, was a direct result of this concern born during my years at Ailey.

The Board of the organization was changing as well. One of the important conclusions of the strategic plan we completed shortly after I arrived was that the company needed a stronger Board. Too many of the current Board members were lovely, supportive people who had a limited amount to contribute to the company. The growth of the Ailey organization necessitated a Board overhaul, a painful but essential element in the organization’s development.

When an organization is very small, Board members frequently act like unpaid staff. They sew costumes, balance the books, drive people to the theater, etc. As the company matures, and more staff is hired to fill these roles, the Board is needed to provide resources and access to those with resources. Half of the Ailey Board gave less than \$500 per year to the organization when I arrived. This was simply not enough. The Board voted to ask its members to make a minimum contribution of \$10,000 per year, although a few people who contributed in other ways were granted exceptions.

This new requirement caused many Board members to resign. Several were angry and remain angry with me to this day. But the ability to bring in new Board members, with both resources and an expectation that they were to contribute them, had a huge impact on the organization. And the strong marketing program we had implemented attracted many new Board members.

The vicious cycle endured by troubled arts organizations was stood on its ear; now people wanted to contribute to the Ailey organization.

The one group that did not change at all (and have not to this day) was the artistic leadership of the organization. Judith reigned supreme, but she was supported by three invaluable aides. Masazumi Chaya, who had been promoted to Associate Artistic Director shortly after I arrived, is one of the great unsung heroes of dance. Sylvia Waters is, in many respects, the conscience of the Ailey company. Sylvia, a former Ailey dancer, had been very close to Alvin and was one of the executors of his estate. Through all of the negotiations with Mrs. Cooper on the purchase of the Ailey rights, Sylvia was a major force. She runs the Repertory Ensemble, the Ailey junior company, and was responsible, therefore, for grooming a generation of Ailey dancers. Denise Jefferson is the Director of the Ailey school, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center. The school is a large and important part of the organization. The Ailey dancers are unusual in the number of dance techniques they have to master to meet the needs of the many choreographers who work with the company, from ballet to jazz to many modern dance vocabularies. The Dance Center prepares dancers in each of these disciplines. Judith, Chaya, Sylvia and Denise comprise the most coordinated artistic team I have ever worked with. They were all so dedicated to the vision of the Company and provided an integrated approach to the training of the dancers. It was a privilege to watch them work.

Denise and I worked well together to ensure that the Ailey school could meet its educational goals while minimizing the financial support required. This included adding programs for young children, expanding our summer program and establishing a joint venture with Fordham University. I was particularly interested in this joint venture. The students at the Fordham campus at Lincoln Center, across the street from the Ailey studios, could take Ailey classes to meet their Physical Education requirements. Fordham paid a fee for each of these students. Ailey dancers and students were allowed to take courses at Fordham as well. This two-way venture proved very successful for both organizations.

The Center's students gave performances throughout the year. These performances gave opportunities to young dancers to perform and to emerging choreographers to create works. Denise and I had a running "conversation" about the length of these performances, most of which were given in the school's semi-ventilated studios. (The Ailey organization has recently moved into a beautiful new building, thanks to a remarkable Board Chairman, Joan Weill, Sharon Luckman's tremendous energy and talent, and a large and dedicated donor base. I was happy to endow the archives as a small gesture to the amazing artists who gave so much to me and others.)

The Ailey school gave me the opportunity to watch youngsters learn and develop the skill and artistry required of professional dancers. I remember how Amos Mechanic went from a gawky pre-teen to a beautiful dancer. Matthew Rushing, now an Ailey star, started in a summer program. There is a special joy in watching young artists mature; I hope one day to run a conservatory.

The dancers, too, were unbelievably dedicated to the Ailey vision. It was a joy to work with the senior dancers, Sarita Allen, Dudley Williams, Gary DeLoatch and Marilyn Banks. Gary's illness and death were incredibly painful. The day he died we were performing on Long Island.

The trip to the theater was the saddest I had ever experienced. The joys of touring were replaced with tears and introspection but the memorial service we mounted at the Joyce Theater was filled with the joy and warmth that Gary brought into our lives.

Virtually every one of the dancers became a friend. I have always made a point of being a presence in the lives of my artists, taking time from meetings to watch them work. In every organization I have managed, I am a familiar sight standing stage right and exchanging words of support and commiseration. So much of the joy in my life has come from the friendship of my artists and the pride I take in watching them dance.

Dancers strive for perfection. All dancers. When they exit the stage they only dwell on the mistakes. I found that I could support them by being completely honest. If something was great I told them. If something was awful I placed it in perspective, but I was always honest and did not sugar coat. There were so many Ailey dancers who were important to me. Many, including Liz Roxas, Dwight Rhoden, Michael Thomas, Karine Plantadit, and Desmond Richardson are still friends.

The Ailey dancers, crew and artistic leaders gave me a great education in the lives of black Americans. I had been raised in a home where color distinctions were not important. I had always had black friends. But at Ailey white people were a minority and I had to learn a great deal about the issues and concerns of the black community. I learned to relax and be honest about the differences between African-American and Euro-centric cultures; this has given me the freedom to work in so many other African-American organizations and helped me feel at home in later years in my work in South Africa.

Bringing white and black people together in this safe environment was a central part of Alvin Ailey's vision for his company. He was, perhaps, the inventor of the concept of outreach. He believed that his company had an obligation to bring dance to the people, all people. He was doing lecture-demonstrations in inner-city schools in 1962, long before it was fashionable and government and foundation grants were available. He did it because it was right to do it.

Over the years, the Ailey dancers have become quite adept at introducing dance to children in the schools. When a Kansas City residency was established, some of the local citizens felt that an in-depth program was needed for local school children. Out of this belief came "Ailey Camp," a summer program for "at risk" teens. The Camp includes dance training in several disciplines (ballet, jazz, modern, etc.) but also includes personal development sessions and reading classes. The focus is on discipline and respect of body. These are central to the life of a dancer and especially important for children who face challenges of teen pregnancy, disease and drug abuse.

Ailey Camp was well established in Kansas City by the time I came to Ailey and we were able to introduce camps in Baltimore and New York. The New York Camp was mounted in cooperation with the Children's Aid Society. I worked with T Jewett, the Society's head of fundraising on developing the program. It has remained a successful and important element of the Ailey portfolio. During the initial Camp session in New York, I worked with the children on creating an Ailey exhibition. We used old photographs to tell the story of the Ailey company. It was a great success and much fun for me. One of the joys of working in the arts has always been the opportunity to work with children.

Another is working with important artists. The Ailey company attracts many choreographers of renown. Donald Byrd did several works for us as did Louis Falco and Lar Lubovitch. Billy Wilson created a lovely ballet, *Winter in Lisbon*, to Dizzy Gillespie's music. The premiere of that work was given at an opening night gala in New York. Mr. Gillespie was meant to come but was too ill to appear. Bill and Camille Cosby hosted the evening. I was especially pleased they participated because I remember his telling the organization that he would not be involved again until we had our house in order. I felt his appearance signaled a change in his perception of the company. A few days after the gala, a check from the Cosbys arrived; I was thrilled.

Another celebrity gala host was Jessye Norman. Miss Norman had a great system for supporting arts organizations. She would bring friends to a performance and then make each of them write a check to the company. We always enjoyed those envelopes filled with checks!

Money, of course, is always a problem for an arts organization, even for one that is growing and doing well. Throughout the three years of my tenure at Ailey, we continued to work on the NASF program that had been introduced the month before I arrived at the company. If we were successful meeting its requirements, the NASF promised us one million dollars, a huge amount for the Ailey organization. The money would be received over several years. The biggest and most important portion, approximately \$400,000, would be received in 1993 if we were successful in earning a similar size surplus in that fiscal year.

The Ailey organization rarely broke even; earning a huge surplus would be an immense challenge.

As the 1992-93 fiscal year progressed, we realized that the impact of the marketing programs and Board development we had implemented would result in the increase in funding needed to earn the NASF target surplus. It is one of the greatest sources of pride to me that we made that target. It never seemed possible at the outset.

Our new fiscal health gave us increased artistic flexibility. One highlight of the 1993 New York City Center Season was the restaging of Alvin's *The Mooche*. The work, about three great black female entertainers, was not a great success. But I was pleased to be able to mount it since Judith had wanted to do it for many years. I had always promised that we would do *The Mooche* when we could afford to reconstruct the lavish sets and costumes. Having it on stage felt like a victory.

Another highlight of the season was Jerome Robbins' *New York Export: Opus Jazz*. This precursor to his legendary choreography for *West Side Story* gave us a chance to work with this dance genius. Mr. Robbins wrote to Judith just as plans to mount Martha Graham's *Diversion of Angels* had fallen through. He was interested in working with the Ailey dancers. This felt like a victory.

As noted above, the 1993 City Center season opened with the wonderful 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary gala and was hugely successful at the box office. A great deal of the success was the result of the ballet, *Hymn*, which Judith created with Anna Deavere Smith. To market the season and the work, Judith asked Annie Liebovitz, the brilliant photographer, to photograph the ballet. Ms. Liebovitz was remarkably generous with her time. She took the dancers to a beach house and

made a series of phenomenal photographs. They displayed the beauty of the dancers and the emotion of the work.

I felt they were a bit *risqué* and would lead to complaints from the more conservative members of the public, but I was overruled. I was wrong. We had almost nothing but compliments on the ads and the photos became very popular. (One irate subscriber did send us back our season brochure with the words “Don’t you people go to church?” scrawled over it.)

The choice of photographs is very important. Most dance companies make a mistake when selecting photos for ads, brochures, etc. They select the photos that appeal most to the artists themselves. These photos may be beautiful but they may not be enticing to the marginal ticket buyer. I believe the most dedicated audience members are going to come to a show anyway. We need to market to those potential ticket buyers who are selecting amongst several entertainment options.

I made that point to the Martha Graham Company when I did some consulting for them in later years. I love the pictures of Martha in Halston costumes. They remind me of the great works of that dance genius and the tremendously moving moments I have experienced in the audience. But I am going to buy my tickets anyway. I think the photos are not as enticing to the marginal buyer and they do not convey the tremendous energy, joy and diversity of the Graham repertory.

I have always favored pictures of dancers in movement, particularly male dancers since women buy a larger portion of dance tickets for virtually every dance company in the world. My first season at Ailey we had a fantastic photo of Desmond Richardson in our ads and brochures. We also, for the first time, advertised in subway stations. This brought a whole new audience to Ailey. I am convinced the dynamic photo of Desmond and its placement in the subways had an impact on our box office revenue, a record for the Ailey company. The Liebovitz photos had a similar impact. No one could look at those pictures and not be enticed.

By the end of the 1993 season I felt I had achieved at the Ailey company what I could. The organization had been transformed. I was exhausted and I knew that I was simply not the right person to stay and bring the company to a new level.

I am often asked why I leave jobs so quickly. For years I felt that I simply got too frightened to stay, that the turnaround was “lucky” and that the truth would be found out if I stuck around. There is perhaps a grain of truth in this but I believe the larger truth is that turnarounds are exhausting. They take a huge investment in energy, emotion and time. They are also incredibly scary. While it is fun and gratifying, in retrospect, to look at the steps one took to solve serious problems, while one is in the initial stages, it is very frightening.

One comes to work each day not certain whether one has the funds to survive until the next day. Making weekly payroll is especially difficult; one scrounges for the funds to ensure that the artists and staff continue working. Frequently, senior staff is not paid in a timely fashion. Vendors are on the phone constantly haranguing you for money; and one has no good defense. They are owed the money. Particularly smaller vendors and individuals, including choreographers, designers, etc., are in need of the money you owe them. One feels guilty constantly even if you were not with the organization when the debts were incurred.

The staff and artists are demoralized by the anger they encounter from vendors, from the lack of resources, and the fear and exhaustion and uncertainty. They are in great need of leadership, support, and encouragement.

If one is successful at creating the turnaround, the elation at the moment when everyone realizes the organization is in a different situation is intense and justifies all of the pain. But it leaves one exhausted and drained. One needs to recover. And the organization needs someone with the fresh energy and the vision to take the company to a new level. If one lived during the lean years, it is often difficult to loosen up and spend the newfound resources.

In December 1993 I needed to recover and I resigned from Ailey. It was painful. I had come to love the organization, its mission, my staff and, especially, the dancers. I had found a home at Ailey and was continuously challenged and rewarded.

The dancers dedicated my final performance, the last in the City Center season to me. I was deeply gratified and moved.