

# Berkeleyside

## AileyCamp back in motion after 2-year gap in Berkeley

Ximena Natera | August 22, 2022



The camp taught dozens of 11-14-year olds dance moves created by the legendary choreographer Alvin Ailey.

After a two-year hiatus due to COVID-19, the AileyCamp brought middle school students from Berkeley and Oakland back into the theater this summer to learn dance performances created by the late legendary choreographer Alvin Ailey.

The six-week national youth program created by Ailey in 1989 combines rigorous dance training in modern, jazz, ballet and African styles with personal development activities, including leadership and communication. It is meant “to enrich and positively impact the lives of children” across the country.

Locally, Cal Performances has produced the free summer dance camp on the UC Berkeley campus for 20 years and it culminates with a performance at the Zellerbach Hall.

“When Alvin Ailey first started his company, many theaters in the United States would not allow” his dance troupe to perform in their venues because his company was racially integrated, said Kulwa Apará, a camp guidance counselor. “Zellerbach is one of the first theaters to welcome the Ailey company, so it’s a big deal for us to keep this history of making it a safe space.”

**Reversing COVID-19’s fatigue through movement**



The girls at AileyCamp prepare for their finale performance backstage at Zellerbach Hall on July 28, 2022.  
(**Credit:** Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight)

Patricia West, who has been involved with the camp since 2017, was named director last summer when the program was forced online due to COVID-19 restrictions and shortened to four weeks of virtual classes. The students took dance lessons through Zoom and created a video for their final performance.

While last year's challenge was virtual fatigue, returning to campus this summer presented other complications. COVID-19 rates in the Bay Area were soaring with the new Omicron variants when the camp began in June. Still, perhaps the biggest challenge was re-adapting the youth to in-person training after two years of isolation.

West immediately recognized the strain the pandemic had on students. Morale was low.

“We’ve seen a lot of students in this cohort where bullying is a big thing. So being here, it’s an opportunity for us to talk openly about being bullied or being a bully and how to interact with each other,” said West, who has danced professionally with several performance companies in the Bay Area and taught dance at a private school in Oakland.

Apara, who was born and raised in Berkeley, agreed that isolation and the hyper-virtuality of the past years had shaped the youth in a unique way.

“A lot of times, they’re moving their bodies in ways that they haven’t moved before. It can bring up stuff, like suppressed emotions or trauma ... especially coming out of COVID.”

She said this year was “very intense because our campers almost went a full two years without movement, without having PE, so our first week was kind of like waking up their bodies again and relearning physical boundaries.”

To reinforce equality, campers wore uniforms. However, makeup was not allowed until the final performance, and cellphones were not permitted.



Students rehearse movements on stage right before their performance. (**Credit:** Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight)



The campers arrived before 8 a.m. on Thursday, July 28. After eating breakfast at UC Berkeley, they spent the morning warming up, rehearsing and trying on costumes. (**Credit:** Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight)



Students do a dress rehearsal on stage at Zellerbach Hall. (Credit: Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight)



Middle schooler Addison Butler takes a break in between rehearsals at Zellerbach Hall. The campers had a few hours to play and nap before the show on July 28, 2022. (Credit: Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight)

### **Last shot at making an impact**





AileyCamp junior leaders Ammar Reizeck, Maliha James and Ciena Brooks relax during a break in rehearsals at Zellerbach Hall. The three high school students from Oakland are former campers working on the show's production and acting as role models for the younger students on July 27, 2022. (Credit: Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight)

To be admitted to the program, students must apply in early spring, interview and complete an orientation session with their families. While they are not required to have dance experience, they must be committed to the program.

“There is a concerted effort to reach far into all the schools in the East Bay, to make sure we reach the most marginalized communities,” Apará explains.

The process takes months as the staff reaches out to principals, counselors, and dance teachers across the Bay, asking them to identify possible candidates. Choosing young dancers is an essential step in the process and the last in impacting this age group.

David McCauley, who launched and directed the AileyCamp at UC Berkeley for 18 years until 2020 when the pandemic brought it to a halt, remembers the story of one student named Spencer Pulu, known affectionately as SPULU.

He had been kicked out of class at Roosevelt Middle School in Oakland when McCauley was on campus for a presentation about the camp. McCauley invited several students, including Spulu, to create an impromptu dance piece.

“A lot of them were just kind of, you know, joking around, not paying attention. And this one young man was there, and he was really focused, cheering and getting people going. I thought this guy has spunk. He knows what to do. He's got vision,” McCauley said.

Pulu is now an AileyCamp associate director. On the morning of the performance in late July, he was one of the staff in charge of running it.

“I couldn't sleep last night,” said Pulu, who comes from a large family that immigrated from Tonga. “The final performance brings so many memories of friends and loved ones.

“A lot of our dance and music learning was through church. In my culture, dance was an extracurricular activity. I didn’t grow up thinking that men were allowed to dance, specifically ballet, jazz, modern dance.”

That changed when McCauley invited him to the program.



Former Ailey camper and current associate director, Spencer Pulu, known affectionately as SPULU. **(Credit: Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight)**

“I think acting out and misbehaving was the way I kind of explore. ... There were not many outlets to explore arts. I got in trouble for fighting in school,” he said.

The school principal pushed him to join the camp, and Spulu, somewhat annoyed at the idea, accepted.

“I was really nervous. Everyone was associating dance and movement with queerness and being feminine,” Pulu said.

That summer, he found an outlet through dance. In high school, he returned to the camp as a junior leader and later as a staff member every summer through college. Last year, he joined West to help run the camp and imagine its future.

“A lot has changed,” Pulu said. “These kids are so inclusive. They’ve learned throughout the years as media has shifted the narrative around queer identity, and they have a lot of exposure to that.”

McCauley, 72, a Detroit native and Bay Area resident since 1990, was a member of the Alvin Ailey Dance Company, first as a student and later as rehearsal director.

“You don’t catch everybody, but many you do,” he said. “And for me, when I was directing, it was about giving a lot of those things that Mr. Ailey had given to me.”



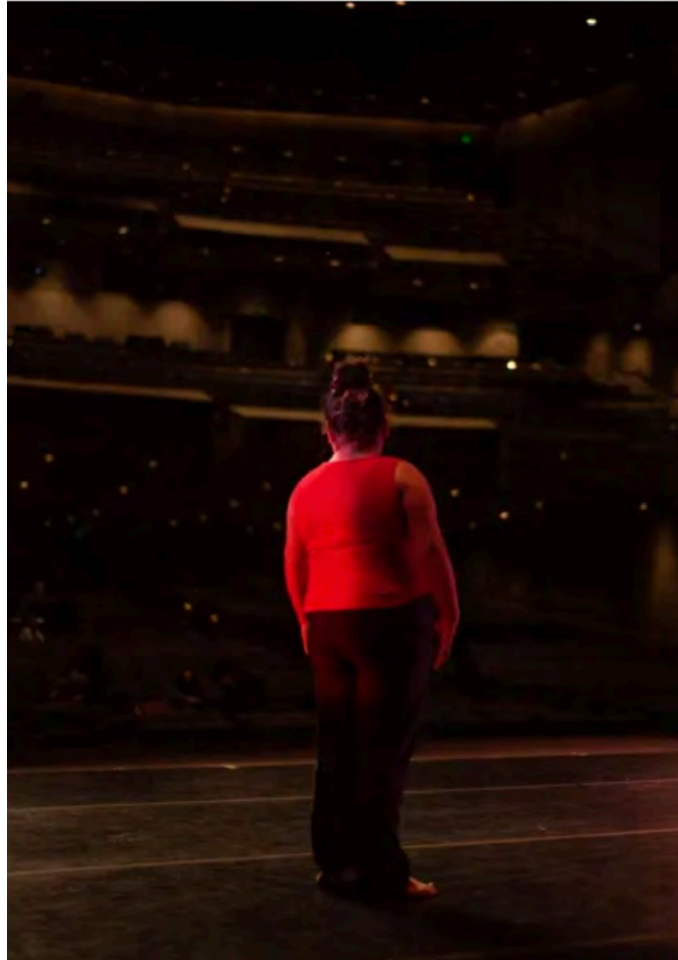
AileyCamp dancer Oren Frieson, left, and ballet instructor Vincent Chavez watch the performance from behind the stage, July 28, 2022. (Credit: Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight)

Besides fundraising, McCauley said the challenge has always been to keep the program relevant for the students.

“The campers come with their music, the language, and all of that changes. The camp must grow and evolve and always stay relevant. Patricia’s challenge now is to expand and create a new network in the community the camp serves. When I say the community, I mean The Community! The people in Berkeley, Oakland, Richmond; it doesn’t matter, race, religion, creed, none of that matters. If this is something that appeals to you, then you are welcome here, and that is a challenge.”



Girls play during downtime before AileyCamp’s finale performance at Zellerbach Hall. (Credit: Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight)



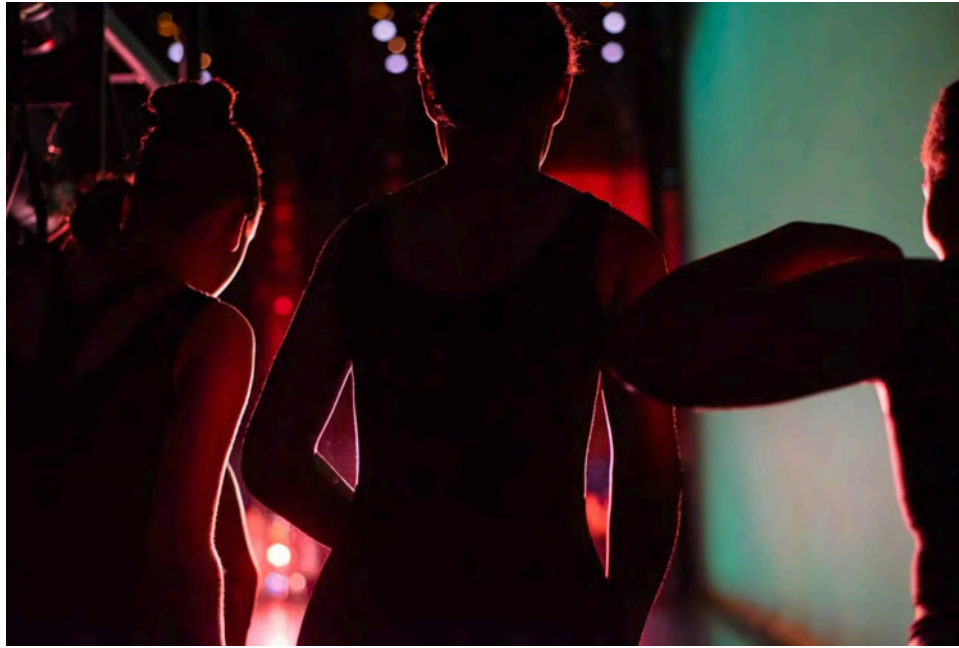
Isabel Thuma rehearses a jazz number at Zellerbach Hall on June 28, 2022. (**Credit:** Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight)



Nasha Thomas, AileyCamp national director, gives feedback to the students during a morning rehearsal on July 28, 2022. (**Credit:** Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight)

## **Curtain call**





Backstage, students watch their classmates perform on July 28, 2022. (Credit: Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight)

It's showtime for the cohort of 48 young dancers to put all they learned in the past six weeks into one special night.

But before the curtains were raised, West led one last group exercise to alleviate their nerves. In a wide circle, they each named a feeling followed by a burst of movement from rage to warmth, happiness and shame. Laughs and giggles transformed into stillness and quiet energy. On the side of the stage, teachers watched, pacing. The show began.

Barefooted and wearing black leotards and tights, they performed "I've Been Buked," an excerpt from Revelations, Alvin Ailey's signature masterpiece, a homage and reflection of African American culture that was inspired by his childhood memories in rural Texas and the Baptist church.

West said bringing dance into the classroom is "just another way of learning" and showing young people how to express themselves.

"I think younger children understand that they're in their body; they express themselves from the inside out. ... In American culture, there's a myth that a dancer looks a certain way. We try to shape ourselves and get frustrated if our body can't do something. Children start to say, 'well, no, I'm not a dancer' because we've really misnamed what a dancer is. So yeah, I try to disrupt that notion."



AileyCamp dancers prepare for the final performance at Zellerbach Hall on July 28, 2022. (Credit: Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight)



Camp director, Patricia West, leads the dancers in an exercise before the final performance on July 28, 2022. (Credit: Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight)



AileyCamp's final performance at Zellerbach Hall on July 28, 2022. The summer program returned to the UC Berkeley campus after two years. **(Credit: Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight)**



AileyCamp dancer, A'Marah Brandon, backstage at Zellerbach Hall. **(Credit: Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight)**



AileyCamp staff watches the student's final performance from backstage on July 28, 2022. (**Credit:** Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight)