



ALONZO KING



In 2008, San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom presented the Mayor's Art Award to King, calling him a "San Francisco treasure."



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King collaborated with Grammy Award-winning musician Zakir Hussain to premiere a new work for the 35th anniversary of LINES Ballet in 2018. The two have worked together for over 20 years.

For choreographer and artistic director Alonzo King, dance is more than a discipline: it's a letting go. It's the search for an answer, a confession instead of a performance. King's LINES Ballet company, which he co-founded in San Francisco in 1982, is a synthesis of classical ballet performed on pointe with modern abstraction, world dance and scorching expression. Yet he describes his work—which has become part of film, television, opera and dozens of international repertoires—as “thought structures.”

King's training might be rooted in classical ballet, but the diversity of movement, music and inspiration in his work is radical. His ballets are choreographed to tabla, field recordings of Sephardic music, traditional gypsy songs, gospel and spirituals. They are danced to ancient Persian instruments or a mezzo-soprano standing on stage, to Coltrane and Shostakovich, Indian folk and a cappella pygmy music. Some critics see King as pulling Eurocentric ballet out of its parochial, homogeneous elitism—and increasing irrelevance—and into the real world.

Born in the mid '50s in Albany, Georgia, King found a similar struggle. His father,

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Slater King (whose father had founded the city's NAACP chapter), was an activist, pioneering low-income and elderly housing while leading boycotts and enduring jail time. The family lived at the epicenter of the nonviolent desegregationist Albany Movement in 1961. His mother, Valencia King Nelson, who later founded African-American genealogical research community AfriGeneas, had studied dance and dance interpretation. The couple's home became not just an activist hot spot but a cultural salon where Alonzo and his six siblings were exposed to guests from diverse cultures across music, dance, art, theater and performance. Slater, a follower of Rama Krishna, also kept a meditation room in the house where he would send his children to meditate for three minutes at a time, starting from a very early age.

King's parents lived what they believed, instilling in their children a real sense of integrity, humility, courage and vulnerability—the same qualities the choreographer seeks today. “My father was ready to die for what he believed in,” King recalls. “When you're around a community of those people, what they want to do and what they should do



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are completely aligned. There is no division between what they say and what they do.” To King, such people are both inspiring and intimidating, and he applies that same intersection of self-examination and total commitment in the world of dance.

“When you see that commitment, when a person stands in that conviction, it’s not just on the day that they march,” he says. “It’s in the way they live their lives every day. And when those are your parents, they become an example of how to live in the world, of what self-examination looks like, what commitment and partnership look like.” He says dancing also requires you to be both in the moment and selfless. “You’re not imitating, cloning or knocking something off,” he says. “You have to step into the embodiment of an idea. As an artist, you’re giving your life to something, for something, and the larger community, the larger self, becomes the priority.”

One of the most transformative experiences in King’s life was his introduction to yoga by way of his father. “It means unity,” he explains, noting how its practice mirrors that of dance. In fact, yoga’s tendency to look beyond form and gender may have its analog in King’s unconventional use of gender. The director has been known to incorporate movement passages for two dancers, or pas de deux, between two men, and to create variations that privilege character over biology in his choreography.

King studied ballet as a child, moving to New York in his teens to train and perform at the Harkness School of Ballet, with the companies of Donald McKayle and Lucas Hoving, at the Alvin Ailey Dance School, and, later, at the American Ballet Theater School. Like

his parents and grandparents, King attended Fisk University, but he left after a year, moving to Los Angeles to work with modern dancer Bella Lewitzky. He says Lewitzky had an integrity and honesty that rang true for him. While most people saw ballet as Eurocentric—or “taught ballet like it was a secret,” he says—King identified myriad other cultural influences such as the geometries it borrowed from the Middle East. Where others saw ballet as a style, King understood it as a language, capable of absorbing other languages, and assuming limitless expressive potential.

Early on, inspiration often came in dreams. Today, he says a ballet must generate authenticity. King asks himself: Does this have conviction? Is this real? Is this accurate? He once described attending Mass as an altar boy and watching the older members of the congregation. “Observing that mental state was powerful. It was private, it was centered, it was interior—and it was beautiful,” he remembers. “When you observe anyone really believing in something, it’s a powerful thing to see.”

King wants his dancers to dance with truth but also with feeling and intuition, which have intelligence instead of emotion, which can get in the way. “The most important thing to a dancer is how to communicate an idea clearly, whatever it takes,” he says. “We sometimes forget that the idea comes first, and techniques are employed to bring the idea to life.” King believes that each human is a tiny microcosm—“a collection of whirling forces in super motion,” he says—containing all the properties and potential of the universe. “Externally, the body inhabits a small space,” he says. “Internally, it is a vast infinity.”*

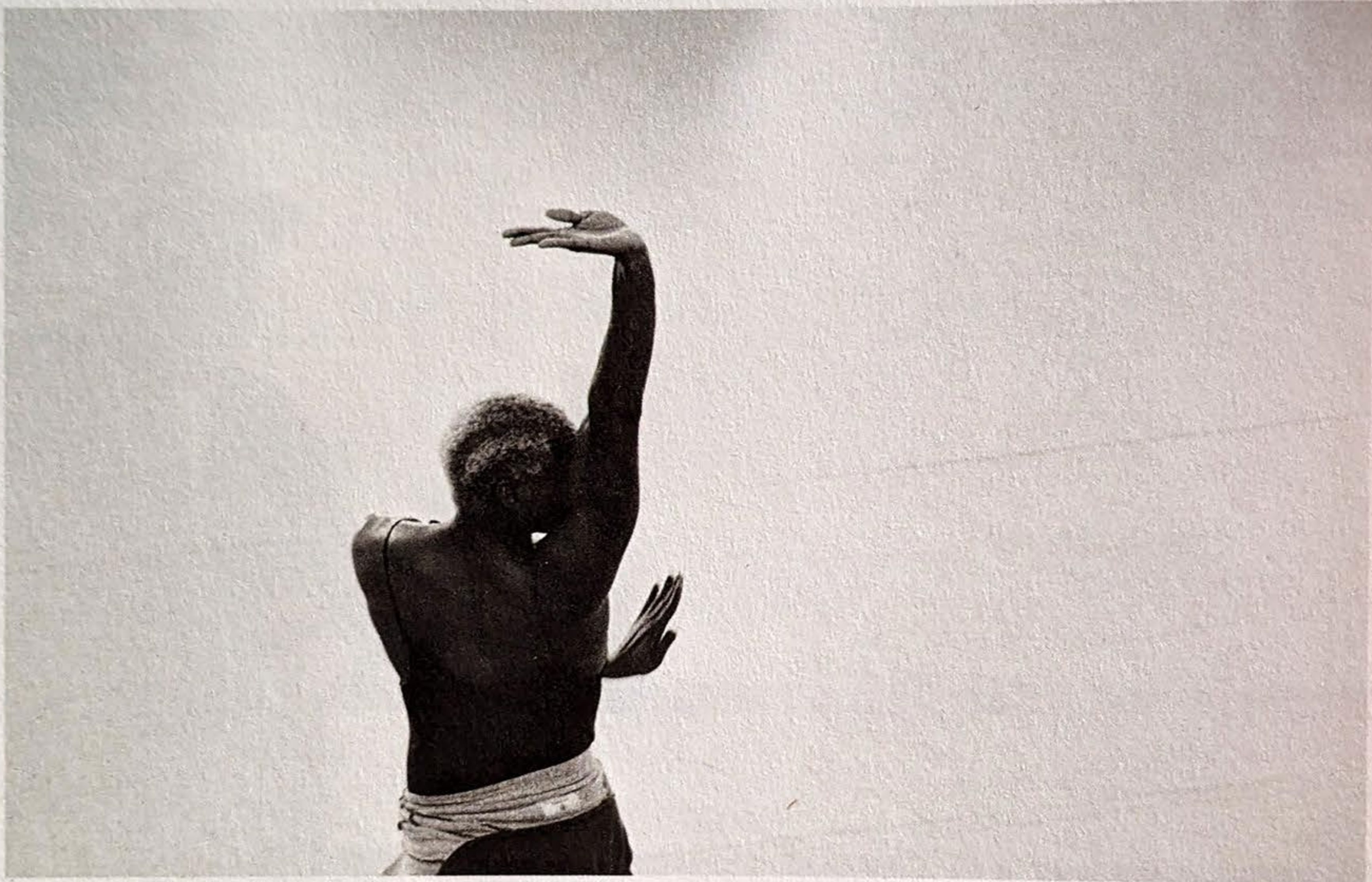
In 2017, King partnered with poetry slam pioneer and language expert Bob Holman to craft *Figures of Speech*, a ballet based on the concept of dying languages.

As an artist, you’re giving your life to something.





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King says he'd like to see politicians dancing in 2018. "I'd like to see the world practicing art," he told *Dance Magazine*, "because the introspection from true art practice can't lie."



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Award-winning choreographer William Forsythe lauded King as "one of the true Ballet Masters of our times."