

# thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Mitch Martinez

## Chronicling Passion for a Life of Dance

by Kristen Shahverdian

Jaye Allison's book, *Her Chronicles Continue... Open Letter to YOU* is a correspondence from author to reader to "share some big little things to know about the arts and especially how even one (1) person can make a difference." Allison is a Philadelphia native, tap artist, educator, and author of two books: the 2015 children's book *Chronicles of Carols in Color: The Storybook* and the sequel, *Her Chronicles Continue*.

*Chronicles of Carols in Color* shares how Allison and her then-dance partner Leon Evans met at the Philadelphia High School for the Creative and Performing Arts and formed Leja Dance Theatre. Their most renowned work, the dance musical [Carols in Color](#), continues to this day and is produced by Evans' dance company [Eleone Dance Theatre](#).

*Chronicles of Carols in Color* includes a wide variety of materials: photographs, colorful drawings done by hand with crayons, pencil sketches, graphic illustrations, and even a comic book page. Forwards by Cheryl M. Hazzard, Maurice Hines Jr., Dr. Joan Huckstep and Susan Glazer are fascinating snapshots, each from a different moment in Allison and Evans' development: Allison as a child, Evans dancing on Broadway, both as students at University of the Arts and the dissolution of their company.

The tale ends with a description of their 15-year anniversary concert in 1995. Allison primarily writes with a "you can do it!" attitude, however she is also candid about money shortages and the challenge of getting press to review Leja Dance Theatre shows.

Reviews from media outlets such as Dance Magazine and The Philadelphia Inquirer accompany a copy of the original publicity poster from *Carols in Color*. Leja Dance Theatre's 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration poster lists special guests Rennie Harris Puremovement and choreographers Rod Rogers and Shawn Lamere. It was fun to witness the intersection of many dancers, choreographers, and writers in this compilation of archival dance articles and as such *Carols in Color* is an important contribution to Philadelphia dance history.

Allison writes the 2020 *Her Chronicles Continue* in the same conversational tone, and the description of the book as a "sequel" led me to think it would pick up where the first book left off. However, this book is less about the historical facts and timeline of her dance career and is more about Allison's values and passion for the arts. The book is also targeted for older readers. I asked Allison about the change in approach, and she wrote that she "chose to share my heart for humanity, with the world of families who may be looking for real world answers as to what are they to do with their weird kid!?" The covers of both books reminded me of children's picture books which misrepresented the material inside the sequel, and it took me several readings to let go of that assumption. Once I freed myself, I appreciated the writing on its own terms. Like book art, the object is its own exhibit, utilizing stream of consciousness writing, photographs, graphics, and drawings to share Allison's viewpoint on a life in the arts.

I found the sentence structure and wording confusing at times, but when I opened to Allison's writing style, I enjoyed the dive into her phrasing, becoming enamored with sentences such as, "(I) will use my life experiences as the example, (as so many others have to date and I believe in setting good examples) hang in with me, hopefully I have calculated this value properly."

Allison told me that the first book was written in tandem with her 5<sup>th</sup> grade students. She wrote, "The idea of the book developed [but it was] complicated with too many characters. [I strove for] a method to not step on anyone's toes and tell a clear story about the LOVE that made history as the focus." The second text was born from the desire for adults to know the story and came after Allison workshopped the *Her Chronicles Continue* material as a spoken word/dance performance. I can imagine this line spoken to an audience: "Horton hook, falls, Graham floorwork. When/where did those dance death drops come from? I'm just sayin'. You must witness something to get an idea."

The desire to share her story while not "stepping on anyone's toes," means that Allison talks around events without explicitly stating what happened-or by whom. She writes, "living over four decades in this field, being kicked out of concert dance, black-balled, ignored, stripped of my reputation, works, jobs...targeted for annihilation, homelessness through fiscal means. (don't worry! my fingertips caught the windowsill of public assistance in time to save any dignity left)." Personally, I would love to hear more about any of those stories.

The photographs that capture my eye are the ones I can interpret easily: Allison teaching children and Evans dancing. With the other images I am curious how these strangers contribute to the story. A collage of dancing bodies fills the shape of a person that I imagine is Allison and I wonder if she contains the people who have shaped her career. Without captioning, I miss witnessing an archive as I did in the first book.

Allison pours her passion and her need to dance into *Her Chronicles Continue*, but this is not a lighthearted persuasion for a career in the arts. The title of chapter six, "The Weight of the World," is an apt description of how I felt reading about Allison's artistic life. By the end, the book calls to rally behind the arts, boldly proclaiming, "Clearly the arts are more than honorable but grossly underrated. The fate of humanity may well be at stake!" There is no doubt that Allison has pursued a life deeply entwined with the art of dance and she has created two tangible proofs to that legacy, as well as a manifesto for why we must do more to value the arts in America.

Jaye Allison, [\*Chronicles of Carols in Color: The Storybook and Her Chronicles Continue...Open Letter to: YOU\*](#)

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