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Keeping It

Fresh



Husband-and-wife jazz dance teachers make “old school” relevant for young dancers

By Eliza Randolph



Photos courtesy Annie Day and Marcus Alford



ou could call Marcus Alford and Annie Day the duke and duchess of jazz dance. Partners

in marriage and in business, both studied with jazz masters and have choreographed, performed, and taught for more than 30 years. Alford performed with jazz legend Gus Giordano for a decade, and Day studied with the likes of Luigi and Phil Black, and then worked as second in command to Jojo Smith, founder of what is now Broadway Dance Center.

Now based in Atlanta, Alford and Day own a thriving studio, Dancentre South, Inc., and produce Jazz On Tap—the Metro Atlanta Jazz and Tap Dance Festival, now in its 26th year. Their love of jazz encompasses respect for the “founding fathers” with whom they studied and welcomes the continual development of the form through the influence of popular culture.

Their jazz roots

Alford, after earning a dual degree in modern dance and business administration from The University of Alabama, planned to pursue modern dance further with a master’s degree from Florida State University. Before he got to Florida, however, his family gave him the gift of a three-week workshop with Gus Giordano, who was to visit UA in 1975. “Well,” he says, “Gus Giordano did not show up, for some reason, and in his place there was a woman named Lea Darwin [Giordano’s assistant, who put his technique down on paper]. She was an amazing instructor. I will never forget, the first day, she said to us, ‘Put your leg as high as you can, and then arch your back.’ And I thought, ‘You’re insane, lady. Someone’s going to tumble over.’ And then I thought, ‘Oh my god, that’s the coolest feeling in the world.’ It was a back layout.”

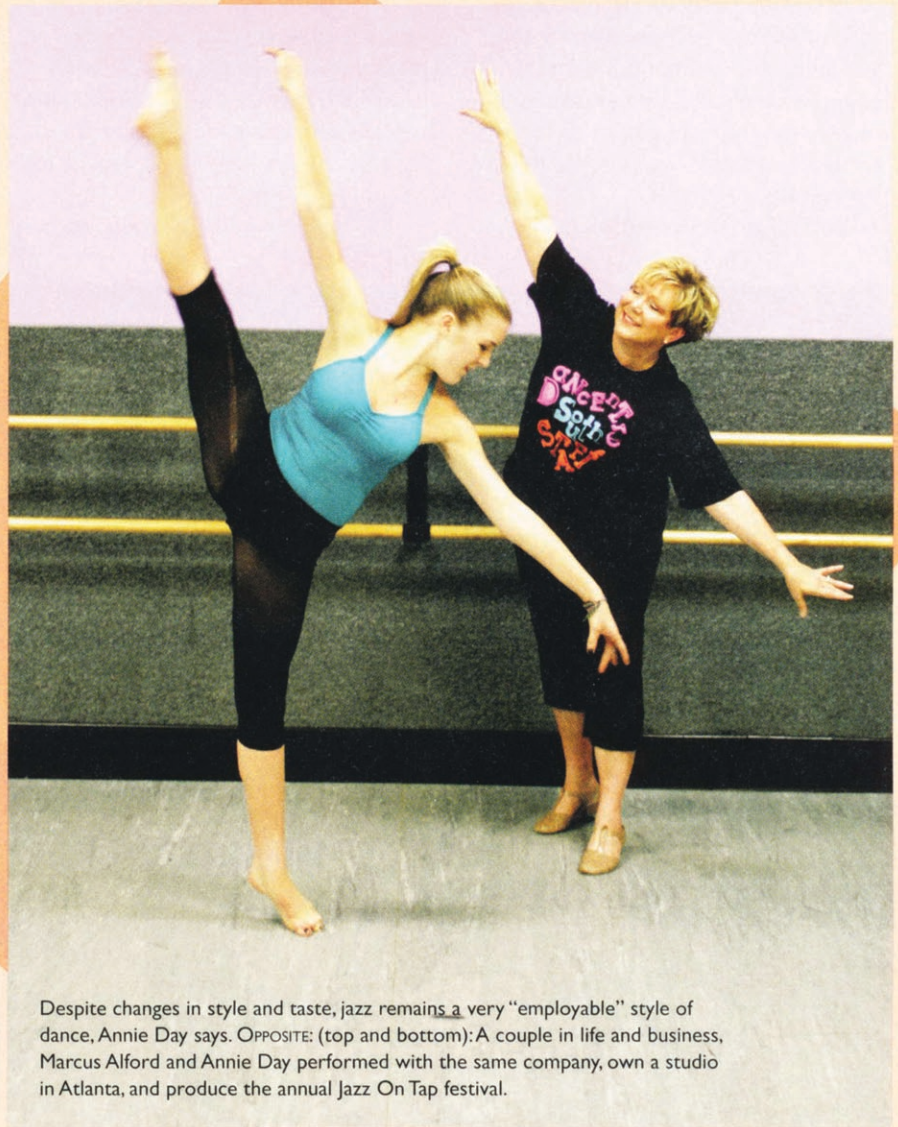
During the workshop, says Alford, “I basically caught on fire.” Darwin offered him a scholarship to the Giordano studio, and he took it,

moving to New York by the end of the summer. Within three years, his career as a Giordano dancer was launched.

Day’s love of jazz began when she was about 8, in an Ohio studio where she first studied Luigi technique. A few years later, having an older sister living on Long Island gave Day a big

said. He saw me in class and said, ‘Dance like the bad girls in your neighborhood.’ Oooh, delicious! Forbidden! For a little person who grew up in farm country in Ohio, to be in Manhattan and in that environment was really cool.”

After a decade of performing with Giordano, Alford felt ready to move



Despite changes in style and taste, jazz remains a very “employable” style of dance, Annie Day says. OPPOSITE: (top and bottom): A couple in life and business, Marcus Alford and Annie Day performed with the same company, own a studio in Atlanta, and produce the annual Jazz On Tap festival.

chance. “I started traveling to study in Manhattan when I was about 11 or 12,” she says. “And I would take with Chuck Kelley, and Luigi, and Phil Black—anybody who would let a young person into class.”

These classes were formative for Day. “I just remember the thing Luigi

out on his own and accepted a position directing a small company in Atlanta. In 1986 he founded his own company, Jazz Dance Theatre South, with which Day performed before the two married and went into business together. Since founding the Jazz On Tap festival, Alford and Day have

watched the field of jazz dance grow and change dramatically.

What is jazz, anyway?

Alford and Day acknowledge that, depending on whom you talk to, jazz dance is either becoming obsolete or it's the most relevant form in the field today. And this all depends on how you define "jazz dance." "Old school," or classical jazz in the style of masters such as Luigi, Frank Hatchett, and Giordano, might be called obsolete by younger students of hip-hop, for example, or of "contemporary dance"—another term with varying definitions.

But not at Dancentre South, where

they teach jazz classes right alongside classes in both hip-hop and contemporary. If you define jazz dance as a form linked with popular music and embracing a wide variety of styles, then it's not only relevant, it's foundational to the ongoing growth of the entire field. That definition encompasses both old and new schools of jazz.

"I don't think it's obsolete. I just don't think that what we call jazz dance now is what it was 10 or 15 years ago," says Alford. "I think many people misconstrue what jazz dance is. It's basically now the core of a lot of contemporary."

Day agrees, and elaborates on how

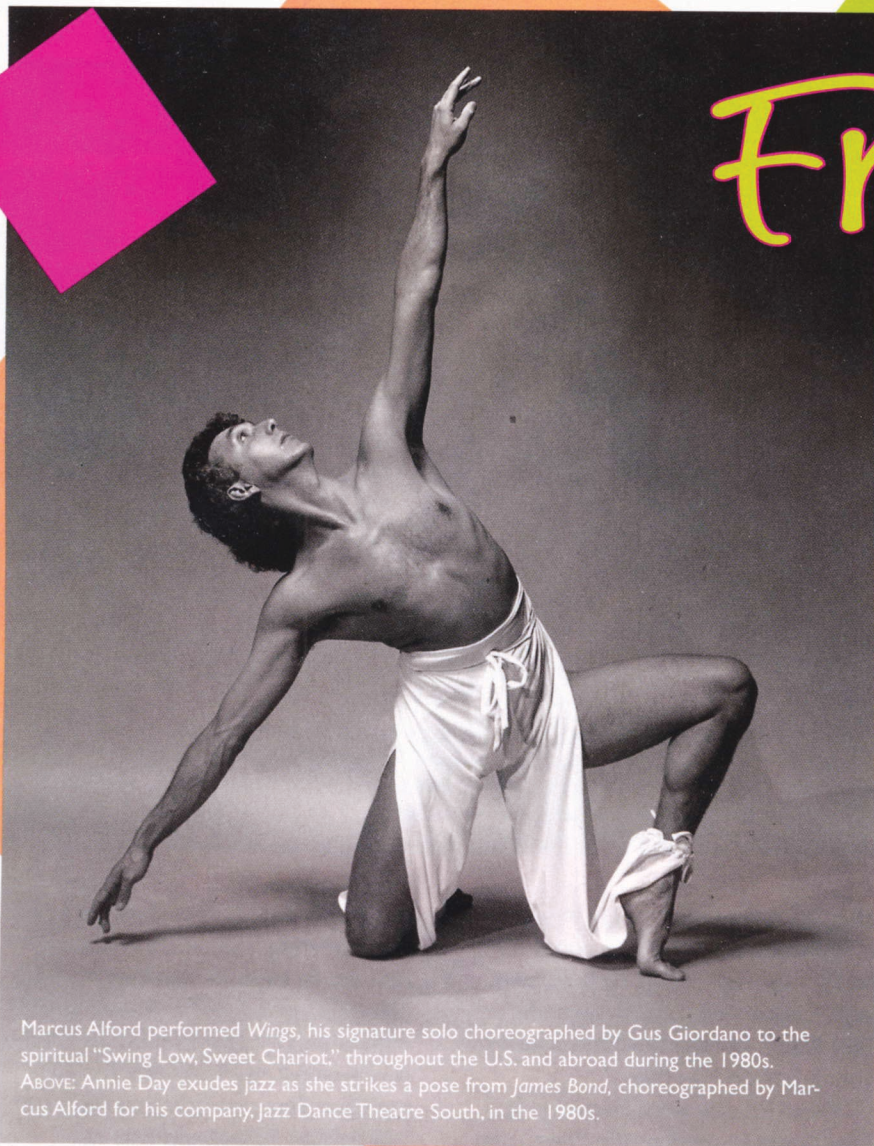


Fresh

new approaches build on and enrich the old. "The vernacular that we're already accessing is just enhanced by a quirky line here, or a different jump there, or a different piece of music than what you might normally work with. I think those things keep your teaching fresh, your choreography fresh. And it keeps challenging the students."

When building jazz dancers, both Alford and Day start with the basics. Says Day, "I would say we give a clean, technical base—good body awareness, good alignment, use of the plié, beautiful feet, clean port de bras. Basically, the building blocks of any strong dance technique have to be there first, and then an understanding of the vocabulary, the steps, and the terminology. And then style is the icing on the cake. You can't be a good jazz dancer unless you have style."

And style is what changes the most over the years, Alford explains. For example, he says, the Giordano technique "is still alive, but that style,



Marcus Alford performed *Wings*, his signature solo choreographed by Gus Giordano to the spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," throughout the U.S. and abroad during the 1980s.

ABOVE: Annie Day exudes jazz as she strikes a pose from *James Bond*, choreographed by Marcus Alford for his company, Jazz Dance Theatre South, in the 1980s.



Alford molds his jazz students into dancers by insisting on a clean technical base of good alignment and port de bras.

that regal, almost effortless jazz that he did, is just not taught so much.”

All about context

Since students don’t always understand that new styles grow out of old ones, Alford and Day work to keep classical jazz alive and relevant in a changing dance scene by giving context to the material they teach. “I have my own style, my own technique,” says Alford. “But I bring in Giordano. When I teach, I’ll say, ‘This is a Giordano exercise,’ or ‘This is a Luigi exercise,’ or ‘This is Horton,’ educating the students. Sometimes a young student will say, ‘Who is Gus Giordano?’” In response, Alford points to the sky and says, “He’s up there!” and gives some background.

Alford also teaches jazz in the dance department at Kennesaw State University, where he enjoys providing his college students with even more historical context for their studio practice. “There I can really break it down,” he says. “‘This is a Giordano jazz hand; this is a Fosse jazz hand,’ etcetera.” One of Alford’s college students, in a teaching evaluation, wrote, “He teaches half old jazz and half the new stuff. Why doesn’t he just teach the new stuff?” Says Alford, “I thought that was a compliment.”

Alford understands that the explo-

sion of dance in popular culture—on TV, for example—can obscure the foundations of the form and its study. TV shows like *So You Think You Can Dance* often don’t give students enough context for what they’re seeing and for how deep their study of dance needs to go. Alford is a savvy teacher, and he works hard to keep his teaching fresh. He and Day both regularly serve as judges at competitions. “I love to sit up there and see what’s going on,” says Alford. “What is it up there that fascinates that dancer? That tells me *this* is the newest and latest thing to do.”

His energy for teaching and even performing seems boundless. “I’m 58 years old,” he says, “and I’m still learning, seeking, and wanting as much as they do.” Also, keeping up with popular music helps the teaching duo stay up to date. “I can be old-school,” says Alford, “but I love listening to all kinds of new music.”

Student Bailey Caves, a high school senior who has studied with Alford and Day since age 2, says of Alford, “He’s very fun, and each class is very exciting. I always look forward to both their classes every week because there’s always variety and you don’t get bored.” Caves has enjoyed her study of jazz so much that she’s planning to enter a college dance

program focused on jazz and tap. She was a shy kid, she says, and jazz “really brought out my personality and gave me a lot of confidence. It’s my favorite style to do. It’s very well rounded. [Alford and Day] do a really good job of giving you all different styles of jazz.”

The Jazz On Tap festival, which includes performances by companies from around the country and abroad, as well as master classes with a variety of teachers, also keeps Day and Alford current with developments in the field. “We continue to tweak the faculty and what we offer for master classes,” says Day. “We didn’t used to offer hip-hop, years ago when we started. Now we offer hip-hop, and we offer contemporary, where we used to maybe offer lyrical. We try to broaden the plate of classes that we’re serving up for the kids.”

Through all the growth and change in jazz—the shifts in terminology, the additions of new styles—Day maintains a practical stance. “Jazz is a very employable art form,” she says. “And although we like to do art for art’s sake, you can’t be a professional unless someone pays you for what you’re doing. The audience appeal of jazz has never waned. It’s always been an audience pleaser and an entertaining dance form.” ♦