

Exclusive Interview with the Great Authoress: Alexis Wilson

Written by Patricia Turnier

Thursday, 16 January 2014 17:49



[Alexis Wilson](#) was born in the Netherlands. Dancing has always been part of her life. Actually,

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she started doing it as soon as she learned to walk. Her parents, renowned African-American director/choreographer Billy Wilson and Dutch prima ballerina Sonja Van Beers, were stars in Europe with *The National Ballet of Holland* (now called *The Dutch National Ballet*).

In 1960, Mr. Wilson created the title role

Othello

of the highly respected choreographer Serge Lifar. This role made Bill Wilson into an international ballet star. Later, in the Sixties, Alexis Wilson's parents went to the U.S. to found the

Dance Theater of Boston

. Years later, after the couple divorced, Alexis Wilson moved to New York City with her brother and father. At eleven years old, Alexis Wilson started to study classical ballet seriously at

The New York School of Ballet

. She became the youngest dancer, performing with their small company (

The U.S. Terpsichore

) in their adaptation of

Giselle

. Alexis Wilson benefited from a full scholarship to pursue a professional path as a dancer. At the age of fourteen, she joined

DTH

(

The Dance Theater of Harlem

) as an apprentice dancing in the ballets

The Four Temperaments

,

Serenade

,

Swan Lake

and

Dougla

.

Later, she swiftly moved on to become a featured dancer in the *Emmy Award* winning television special *Blues and*

Gone

. After appearing as a dancer in the Francis Ford Coppola film, "The Cotton Club", she earned a BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts) in drama from

Carnegie-Mellon University

in 1985. Hereafter, she went to Europe where she was involved in concerts and dance festivals. She came back to the U.S. in the early 90s. She became a dancer in New York for the

Essence Awards

choreographed by Michael Peters (who also worked on Michael Jackson's

Thriller

,

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Beat It

, and many others). In addition, she taught dance, was a choreographer's assistant herself and the list goes on. Furthermore, she wrote a full-length musical, as well as a narrative homage to her father's contributions for

PBS

television. She later made short story contributions to these books:

Before I Got Here: The Wondrous Things We Hear When We Listen to the Souls of Our Children

, edited by

[Blair Underwood](#)

and

Not in My Family: AIDS in the African-American Community

, edited by Gil Robertson. Ms. Wilson wrote poems and her work was featured in several published collections. More recently, she staged

Rosa

, danced by Joyelle Fobbs on January 26th, 2013, in Ohio at

Columbus' Lincoln

theatre in honor of the late Rosa Parks. In this performance,

Grammy

winning chanteuse Roberta Flack superbly sang "I Told Jesus". Readers will be able to view the YouTube video after the end of the following interview.

After the death of Ms. Wilson's father in 1994, she stopped performing. She started to work as a casting associate to *Peter Wise of Wise & Associates*, casting national commercials and theater productions including

Broadway's huge hit

Smokey Joe's Café

. She has been involved in philanthropic projects both for people in need of food and those afflicted by AIDS.

Alexis Wilson wrote a memoir. Wilson's autobiography is not just about a story of an individual. So, we will start by presenting her late father, who inspired in the first place the authoress to pen her book. Billy Wilson was a dancer, ballet and musical theater choreographer. He was among a handful of Black choreographers who created shows for Broadway. At the age of 7, he commenced to dance at *Philadelphia Creative Dance Group*. He had a wide range of talent: tap, tango, ballet, and so on. He worked with prominent people in the entertainment industry, such as Maurice Hines, who created a tango number for his daughter, Alexis Wilson, in the musical

Amsterdam, he mounted the musical

Josephine

, an homage to Josephine Baker and

A Night at the Cotton Club

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. He danced in
West Side Story
in London. In 1976, Billy Wilson had two hit shows,
Bubbling Brown Sugar
and the all Black version of
Guys and Dolls
, running on Broadway at the same time. He also got three Tony nominations for his work and mounted several ballets for Alvin Ailey's company. Hence, in 1992 he created a new ballet for
The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater
, called
The Winter in Lisbon
, an homage to the late Dizzy Gillespie, one of Mr. Wilson's most celebrated ballets. In addition, he directed
Les Deux
and
Black Light for the Dance Theatre of Boston
. It was performed before a studio audience. Prominent publications such as
Ebony
magazine and
[The New York Times](#)
featured him.

Overall, Billy Wilson was a highly respected choreographer who made more than 35 ballets for dance companies from *The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater* to *Opus 1* in Amsterdam, Holland. Furthermore, he choreographed eight Broadway musicals, among other shows. Billy Wilson directed a famed Harvard troupe. He chaired
Harvard University's Hasty Pudding Theatricals
, the most olden dramatic organization in America.
Hasty Pudding
shows' graduates include prominent people such as Franklin D. Roosevelt. He also taught at Cambridge School of Ballet. Through this school's program, he looked for talented kids in underprivileged neighborhoods of Cambridge and Boston. Moreover, he choreographed the two-time Emmy Award winning children's television show Zoom. Wilson's works are part of the current repertory of
The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre
,
Dayton Contemporary Dance Company
,
Philadanco (Philadelphia Dance Company)
and the
Dance Theater of Harlem
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Ms. Wilson lost her father on August 14 1994, when he was 59. Her father's mate, Chip Garnett, died at 49. They passed away six months apart from AIDS. The couple had been together for 18 years. Alexis Wilson felt the need, after these losses, to write about her non-traditional family and express her feelings about her upbringing. *Not So Black and White* is Alexis Wilson's first book. The title of the autobiography evokes what Ms. Wilson is as a person regarding her mixed heritage and what happened in her life. In addition, the title reminds the public that there are grey areas in life and things are not solely black and white. The lovely cover picture of the book, where Alexis Wilson sleeps tenderly on her father, elicits her closeness with her dad. The diverse colors in the sky on this picture reflect the multidimensional life of the authoress and her father. The autobiography starts with a beautiful Negro spiritual quote, followed by a jaw-dropping preface penned by Blair Underwood—Golden Globe Nominee actor who received an award as best "Artist of the Year" from

Harvard University/Harvard Foundation

among other prestigious prizes. This thorough memoir brings to life many aspects of Ms. Wilson's journey. It chronicles her love for dancing and other art forms with their history, her family, her joys, her sorrows—she saw her mother (who left the family since the divorce) three times in thirty years, her angers, the secrets and so on. The autobiographer has been courageous to explore uncomfortable places which give authenticity to her memoir. The book delivers an acceptance of the non-traditional family via parental care. Through it all, the love Ms. Wilson got from her father shined. Her story is really moving. Readers will cry, laugh, and be speechless at some passages. Hence, the book has the power to make the public go through all kinds of emotions. The memoir is very visceral and artistic with poetic prose: the readers can feel the music, the dance, and so on in it. The authoress brings us a fascinating world full of rhythm. The public can grow from reading this great story.

Overall, Ms. Wilson's memoir is multifaceted and a terrific tour de force. Those who love the world of dancing and the bibliophiles will really enjoy the book. As a former semi-professional tap dancer of almost fifteen years, it was fascinating to read about Ms. Wilson's experience when she was being mentored by Maurice Hines for the musical *Harlem Suite*, or when she encountered legends such as Sammy Davis Jr. Dance lovers will enjoy reading about pliés with all the hard work required to mount great spectacles with the lights of Broadway and in other prestigious settings. Furthermore, the readers will take delight in looking at nice pictures (Ms. Wilson as a dancer since her childhood, as a guest at the

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Gala

, etc.) inside the book. The autobiography won't leave the readers cold, especially if they lost loved ones in their own lives. *Not So Black and White* has the power to attract people from all walks of life.

The book covers many topics: duality, abandonment, homosexuality, dance, love, resilience, anger, forgiveness, family, etc. Despite her wounds, Ms. Wilson narrates with insight her difficult upbringing as respectfully as possible. Aforementioned, there is a wide range of emotions in the book: sorrow, humor, delight and so on. The memoir also represents a tribute

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to those fallen from AIDS and to Ms. Wilson's dad. Her beloved father is her muse, one who inspired her to write the memoir in a lyrically poetic prose. In addition, it is a legacy especially for her family, for the lovers of the art world and for the people who embrace diversity. The authoress dedicated the book to her late father, among the other males who supported her, including her husband, musician/trumpeter and jazz orchestra director Byron Stripling. *Not So Black and White*

is a page turner. It brings us into the art culture and into myriads of worlds through the lenses of the writeress. The memoir was part of our top 20 for last fall:

<http://www.megadiversities.com/books/251.html>

:

Autobiographer Alexis Wilson is very articulate. She is bilingual, she speaks English and Dutch. Quite amazingly, *Not So Black and White* is her first book and a self-published one. Wilson is a truly gifted writeress. The memoir has the calibre to become a NY Times bestseller and represents one of the most beautiful autobiographies penned by a daughter in honor of her late father. The memoir was launched last spring in NY and the proceeds went to

Equity Fights AIDS

. Alexis Wilson spoke about her autobiography on PBS, NPR, 10TV, etc. The book should be translated in other languages such as Dutch, French, Spanish, etc. There is talk about adapting the autobiography into a film. It will be very interesting for the public to see how the memoir will be transformed into a visual construction to fit into a movie with amazing choreographies expected.

Alexis Wilson triumphed over her hurdles and has a lot of resilience. In spite of her vicissitudes, she managed to create a life for herself with a stable family. Currently, Ms. Wilson lives in Ohio with her musician/director of the Columbus Jazz Orchestra husband Byron Stripling and their two daughters. She also has a brother, Parker Wilson, who lives in the U.S. *Here she spoke to us mostly about her memoir last September.* Ms. Wilson was really generous with her time during our conversation, which is her first Canadian interview.

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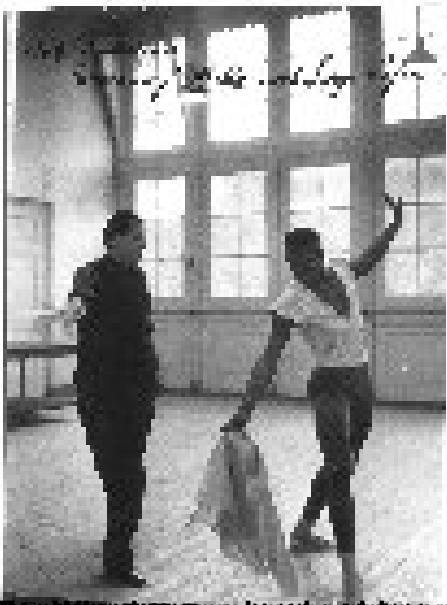
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The book is available on www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1444714444 and www.hamersandnoble.com/con
To purchase the book on Amazon, please click on the link below.

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=190525... https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=190525...