

# All the Right Moves

After a lifetime in dance, Debbie Allen comes full circle, providing a springboard for young talent.

*by Judy Alexandra DiEdwardo*



Life has a funny way of imitating art.

Just ask Debbie Allen, who made her big-screen debut more than 30 years ago as Lydia Grant, the tough but compassionate dance instructor in the 1980 film *Fame*. Allen went on to recreate the part in the television series of the same name, based on the experiences of fictional dancers, singers and actors at the New York City High School for the Performing Arts.

At 59, Allen continues to parlay her no-nonsense work ethic and passion for dancing, directing and mentoring into a brilliant career. Her film and stage roles have earned her two Tony Award nominations, three Emmy Awards and a Golden Globe Award. She's one of the few African-American women working as a director-producer in TV and film. But even these achievements were not enough; in 2000, Allen achieved a lifelong dream, opening a world-class dance academy where she mentors a new generation of young people. Much like the character she played so early in her career, Allen's real-life role provides a launch pad of unlimited possibilities for the 300 students at the Southern California-based Debbie Allen Dance Academy, or DADA. Who better than Allen to fill *that* role?

"Dancing has so much to do with building one's confidence through inner expression that, whether a student pursues a career in dance or not, the inner gifts and life skills they are given are profound and life-changing," she says.

About 70 percent of the students at the academy are on scholarship. Ranging in age from 4 to 18, they choose from 12 dance forms, ballet to tap



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**Launching Dreams**

Debbie Allen played a dance instructor in the 1980s TV series *Fame*; today, she plays the role in real life.

to flamenco to hip-hop. But they actually learn much more: discipline, tenacity, the ability to take criticism, and they experience creative analysis and innovative thinking. "These are life skills that every child should be afforded," Allen says.

"Dancing is so good for the brain, the thinking process. People who are not dancers boost their creativity or become better problem-solvers by participating in dance or the arts. When you

dance, you are completely focused, completely in tune with every cell in your body. You learn how to balance and to execute a vision, just as one does in business. There are so many parallels.”

**Accepting No Barriers**

Born in 1950 in Houston, Debbie Allen grew up with strong role models in her parents: Andrew Allen, a dentist, and Vivian Ayers Allen, a Pulitzer Prize-nominated artist, poet, playwright and publisher. They refused to let segregationist policies or other barriers thwart their children’s dreams.

Her older siblings, actress Phylicia Rashad and brother, “Tex” Andrew Arthur Allen Jr., also pursued careers in the

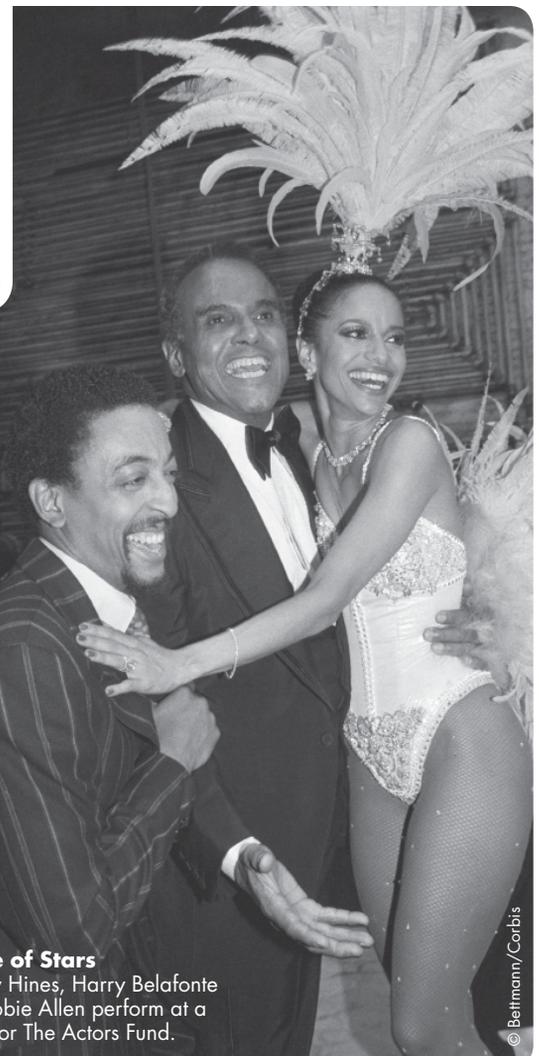


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of African-American modern dance in the early 20th century.

When Allen was 8, she auditioned for the Houston Ballet Foundation. Despite her obvious talent and passion, the ballet company was not ready for an African-American child to break the color barrier. Vivian Ayers Allen had other ideas.

In 1960, Debbie was 10 when her mom packed the children onto a Greyhound bus bound for Mexico City, where they lived for the next year. Debbie could dance with the Ballet Nacional de Mexico and Ballet Folklorico free of the specter of racism. “We experienced a world away from the racism and bitter segregation that we experienced during the 1950s,” Allen says. “My mother was determined to empower us, to give us a new frame



**Parade of Stars**  
Gregory Hines, Harry Belafonte and Debbie Allen perform at a benefit for The Actors Fund.

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**Sister Act**  
Phylicia Rashad and Allen, who worked together on *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, co-own a production company called D.A.D., or Dr. Allen’s Daughters.

Bryan Bedder/Getty Images

arts. Rashad is best-known for her role on the television series *The Cosby Show*, and Tex Allen is an accomplished jazz musician. Debbie Allen’s passion from an early age was dance. “It is something I was born to do,” she says. “It is who I am.”

Growing up watching musicals, she remembers being carried away by the dancing of Fred Astaire; Sammy Davis; Martha Graham; and legendary choreographer, dancer, author and civil-rights activist Katherine Dunham, who was renowned as the innovator

# DEBBIE ALLEN'S *Tenets of Success*

## 1. Self-confidence—

Master your craft so you *are* confident and capable. It's not just about thinking well of yourself. It comes from knowing and trusting your skills, talents. And that means doing what it takes to develop, train, study. From there the challenge is to stay good and smart.

## 2. People skills—

Learn how to work with people, be part of a team. It is essential to all personal success because we never operate in a vacuum. On a team, everyone must feel that they are an integral member. Too, I would never ask anyone to do anything that I was not willing to do. Successful leaders know that their success depends upon team members' success.

## 3. Time to reflect—

That's where all personal creativity comes from, so enjoy solitude and

one-on-one quiet time to reflect and process what you are engaged with. No matter how successful you are, you always need to create space for new ideas.

## 4. Don't ever be afraid to fail—

You can go from what feels like your biggest failure and have your greatest success. Failure teaches me so much.

## 5. Discipline—

It takes energy to stay on the right path, to keep focused on what is most important. Know what those things are and stay true to them.

## 6. Learn to take criticism—

Dancers know this one well! Every day, every moment in the dance studio you are being critiqued, so you learn to grow from it, to learn what you are being taught. All criticism can be truly helpful if taken correctly.

of reference, a new reality, by transporting us to a very different world. It was an adventure. God bless my mother, Vivian Ayers, for changing our lives forever."

After returning to Houston, Allen auditioned again for the Houston Ballet Foundation and, at 14, was admitted on a full scholarship, the company's first African-American dancer. Her struggles weren't over, though; after completing high school, she was rejected for admittance into the prestigious North Carolina School of the Arts. "I was told that I had the wrong type of body for dance," Allen says, which she understood to mean the wrong skin color.

Undaunted, she pursued a bachelor's degree at Howard University; with a concentration in classical Greek literature, speech and theater.

It proved to be the perfect fit for her. "This is where I found and solidified my place in the world and my path moving forward," Allen says. "It was there I connected to myself culturally. It was where I truly began." (She later would receive honorary doctorates from Howard University and the North Carolina School of the Arts.)

## A Dancer Takes Flight

Meantime, while attending a six-week dance festival in New London, Conn., in 1968, Allen met Martha Graham, Twyla Tharp and other legends of modern dance. "That's when I decided to take off my toe shoes and *really* dance," she says. "Once I saw Alvin Ailey, who was a protégé of Katharine Dunham, I realized there was another calling for me besides ballet."

After graduating from college in 1971, Allen moved to New York City and was on her way, developing her talents as a dancer, actress and singer in appearances on Broadway, and eventually in television and movies.

Even as Allen has gotten the nonprofit DADA up and running— assembling a panel of star instructors from the world's leading ballet and modern-dance companies, and working full time to raise the academy's \$1 million budget—she has continued to direct, produce, choreograph and serve as advocate for the arts in education.

She made her Broadway directorial debut in March 2008 with the premiere of an all-African-American production of Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. The critically acclaimed play features her sister, Tony Award-winning actress Rashad. Allen will also play the school principal in an updated movie version of *Fame* due out in September. The film also stars Kelsey Grammer, Megan Mullally and Bebe Neuwirth.

Today, Allen lives in Los Angeles with her husband, former NBA player Norman Nixon, and their two children, Vivian Nichole and Norman, Jr. Vivian is an accomplished dancer who works beside her mother at the academy. Allen divides her time between her academy and various acting roles and directing/producing projects for stage and screen.

Allen is grateful for the opportunities she has received and for the gift of mentors, starting with her own parents and including the pioneers of dance who preceded her.

"Dancing in my backyard as a little 4-year-old is where it all came together for me," Allen says. "It was there that I danced for the birds and the stars, wearing my bathing suit with a towel draped across my shoulders. Today, I am still that 4-year-old dancing for the joy of it. Only now, I have a group of 4-year-olds at my academy, which is where I pass on that opportunity for self-expression, which opens the door to *everything* else. Dancing brings so much confidence because you are commanding time and space when performing on stage. There is no greater gift than to lose yourself inside art. It's true freedom. And my life's work is about passing that baton on to a new generation." **S**

Debbie Allen's  
leadership  
lessons

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