

New feat for dance icon: Piece based on drawing

Apparently Judith Jamison can draw as well as she can dance.

Encouraged by actor, artist and close friend Geoffrey Holder, Jamison, artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, drew the storyboard for her latest dance creation, "Among Us."

Jazz phenomenon Eric Lewis used the drawings to create music for the piece, which is set to debut Dec. 4 at the New York City Center as part of the company's 50th anniversary season.

"It's beautiful, just incredible music," said Jamison, who will be celebrating her 20th year as the artistic director of the award-winning company that the U.S. Congress called a "cultural ambassador to the world."

"Eric Lewis is one of those people we call iconoclastic," she said.

Jamison, 66, who debuted with the American Ballet Theatre in 1964 and danced with Ailey — Ailey created a signature piece, "Cry," for her — for 15 years, said she still gets excited by the work.

"I'm having so much fun with my dancers," Jamison said before heading into a recent rehearsal. "The dancers have to inspire me today, because I'm about to go into a rehearsal without any music because the music has not arrived yet."

"Among Us," Jamison's first choreographed piece since 2005's "Reminiscent," examines "the joys and complications of human relationships."



Alvin Ailey Artistic Director Judith Jamison will debut her latest dance piece, "Among Us," in December. Photo by James Monroe Adams 4th

It came about after Holder — whose wife, Carmen De Lavallade, helped Ailey kick off his dance career — invited Jamison to their downtown apartment.

"I walk in and Geoffrey said, 'Okay, let's draw,'" Jamison said. "He put these markers in front of me and some black paper. It was almost like elementary school, you know, 'make a circle, make an 'm' for the mouth, two o's for the eyes, draw a straight line for the legs."

"He made it like play. So we sat there and drew."

The finished product "looked like some kind of folk art," Jamison said with a smile. "Geoffrey says there is something there. I sold a couple of them."

"I still don't know what I'm doing, but I'm having fun."

Lewis (www.ericlewisgroove.com), a pianist, was asked to compose the score for "Among Us" after Jamison heard him play during a private listening session at a 10th Ave. recording studio.

"He started playing that piano, and I was bowled over," Jamison said. "He played 'Cherokee' like Art Tatum."

Jamison asked Lewis if he would be interested in working together and told him about the piece based on her drawings.

"I said I want you to look at a couple of them and see if anything turns you on," she said.

"One day I was holding a painting up and he was at the piano, looking at the painting and playing away."

"Then a board member came in the room and I put the picture down. Eric went: 'Pick it up, Pick it up!' He was really into creating from the painting!"

"He's inspired by the painting; I'm inspired by my dancers and the music he's creating," Jamison said. "When you put that combination together, you have some interesting things."

Alvin Ailey kicks off its 50th anniversary and five-week performance season with an opening gala Dec. 2 at the New York City Center, 131 W. 55th St., hosted by Pauletta and Denzel Washington.

Tickets are available at the New York City Center box office, through Citytix at (212) 581-1212, or online at www.alvinailey.org or www.nycitycenter.org.

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