

The Star-Ledger

Spiritual walkers



ANDREW ECCLES

Judith Jamison's "Hymn" receives a new production this season at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

AILEY DANCERS MARK 20 YEARS UNDER JUDITH JAMISON

By Robert Johnson
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Nothing in life is as obvious as it seems. That's one message of "Among Us (Private Spaces, Public Places)," the new dance that Judith Jamison has choreographed for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. The current Ailey season, which includes three major premieres and a special retrospective program, celebrates Jamison's 20 years as the troupe's artistic director.

"Among Us," which makes its premiere tonight at New York City Center, presents a series of vignettes. As a group of people strolls through an art gallery with seeming nonchalance, their private dramas are exposed by the choreographer.

In moments disassociated from the normal flow of events, the dancing points to the joys and conflicts that people hide when they are in the public eye. While some of the characters are ordinary individuals, others wear the mantle of greatness. Jamar Roberts, for instance, a seven-year veteran of the company who will be prominently featured this season, plays a character of presidential stature.

Another figure remains mysterious. Clifton Brown portrays a "Jin," or genie, who manipulates events behind the scenes. "He's a magical creature, a fantastical creature," Jamison says, explaining that she believes in the existence of otherworldly beings that sometimes lend a helping hand to mortals. "We call them spiritual walkers."

Jamison says the characters who populate her dance emerged from the paintings she makes in her spare time as another outlet for her imagination.

"Among Us" features an original score for jazz piano, composed by Eric Lewis, who also took Jamison's paintings as his inspiration. The dance vocabulary is eclectic, mixing modern dance techniques with West African dances ("Fanga" and "Sabar") and classical Indian Bharata Natyam.

"I call it multi-cultural sampling," Jamison says.

The choreographer says she hopes to expand her dancers' range with these techniques. Jamison recalls the challenges she experienced, many years ago, while learning to dance "Fanga" from the celebrated cultural anthropologist and choreographer, Pearl Primus.

"At times Dr. Primus had me in tears, because there would be no way in the world that I could imitate what she was doing," Jamison says. "Just the movement of her back was enough to make you think you can't dance."

The other premieres this season

promise to stretch the Ailey dancers in various ways. Roberts, who appears in all of them, describes Matthew Rushing's "Uptown" as a dance-theater piece with text. Here Roberts has an acting role as narrator, offering the audience a guided tour through the Harlem Renaissance.

"Dancing Spirit," by Ronald K. Brown, is dedicated to Jamison, and suggests a subtle parable of leadership. The dance is marked by characteristic moments of stillness and reflection, while in its most athletic passages the work conveys a sense of liberation.

Indeed, Brown's movement goes beyond technique. Describing the rehearsals for "Dancing Spirit," Roberts recalls Brown saying, "Don't try to muscle it. If you open yourself up to what the step is, then it'll just come."

Says Roberts, "It's a technique that allows your spirit to be free."

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Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Where: New York City Center, 55th Street between 6th and 7th avenues, New York

When: 7 p.m., Tuesdays; 8 p.m., Wednesdays through Saturdays; and 7:30 p.m., Sundays, with matinees at 2 p.m. Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sundays, now through Jan. 2

How much: Tickets are \$25-\$150. Call (212) 561-1212 or visit nycitycenter.org.