

How Judith Jamison Started Dancing for Alvin Ailey

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May 2023 Issue (Online: 5/4/23)

from the vault

"Cry is Alvin's work but, when I dance it, it is mine, too," Jamison said in the November 1972 issue of *Dance Magazine* of the iconic solo Ailey created on her. "Dance is a very perfect thing. You give yourself to it, yet you have to prove your power over it.... I have to make it happen!"

Simply Divine

"There is about her an aura of mysticism. She appears onstage, larger than life, more an apparition than a performer, compelling us to look upon her as we might a temple dancer—with a sense of religiosity, of awe." Those were the opening lines of Olga Maynard's November 1972 *Dance Magazine* cover story on Judith Jamison, then in her late 20s and at the height of her powers as a star performer with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Her professional start, however, was far from assured: Though Agnes de Mille recruited her to dance *The Four Marys* with American Ballet Theatre when it premiered in 1965, the contract was short-lived, leading Jamison to work nondance jobs (including as a ride operator at the World's Fair) while taking classes and auditioning. "Nothing in my life, until then, had prepared me for rejection," she told *Dance Magazine*. "Every time I was turned down I took it personally." It was at one such unsuccessful audition that summer, for Donald McKayle, that Alvin Ailey spotted her and decided to ask her to join his company. ("You mean, you decided to take me *that* day, the day of the audition?" Jamison asked Ailey when the two told the story of their first encounter to Maynard. "I went home and cried for three days until you called me!" Ailey replied, "Well, I didn't know where to find you and I had to get your phone number from Carmen [de Lavallade] and Carmen was out of town.") Jamison would dance with Ailey for the next 15 years (save for a brief period between 1966 and 1967 when the company disbanded), and returned to lead the company in 1989 as Ailey's handpicked successor. Now artistic director emerita, Jamison, who celebrates her 80th birthday this month, is the recipient of a *Dance Magazine* Award (1972), a Kennedy Center Honor (1999) and a National Medal of Arts (2001), and was inducted into the National Museum of Dance Hall of Fame in 2015. —Courtney Escoyne