

What It's Like to Take Class From Judith Jamison

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When you're offered a chance to take a class with Judith Jamison, you don't say no.



The company's beloved artistic director emerita rarely teaches open classes. But to celebrate the legacy of Alvin Ailey on what would have been his 87th birthday, she gave a special two-hour workshop at the Ailey Extension on Friday night. I had to try it, even though I was desperately hoping that she wouldn't make us do any Horton coccyx balances. (Spoiler alert: She did.)

So what's it like to take class with the larger-than-life icon?

She's Serious About Honoring Our Elders

In addition to teaching the class snippets of phrases from Ailey's *Revelations*, Jamison gave us combinations that drew on other historic choreographers who contributed to the company, like Talley Beatty and Pearl Primus. She'd infuse her directions with a bit of dance history, without ever slowing down the pace of class—after asking if everyone knew who Primus was, to anyone who said no, she saucily responded, "Google it."



She Treats Everyone in the Room Equally

The all-levels workshop included former Ailey star Renee Robinson and dancers from Ailey II working right alongside novices in their 50s and energetic kids so flexible that they could fool you into thinking they had no hamstrings. Jamison approached every student equally. She offered corrections for anyone on the Marley who wanted to learn. Without talking down to those with less experience, she made sure that everyone was pushing for their own version of excellence.

She Highlights The Power of Strength in Simplicity

For being director emerita of a company as slick and virtuosic as Ailey, it surprised me that many of Jamison's notes had to do with simplifying movement down to its basics. Hand gestures were not to be "too lace-y," torso undulations had nothing to do with the shoulders. Jamison was looking for a straightforward presentation that connected to the audience, with genuine intention and eye contact.



She Taught Us That the Sacred Can Get Something Out of the Secular

Although we learned phrases from *Revelations*, instead of playing the iconic gospel score, Jamison had us practice the movements to funk hits to help us loosen up and capture the grooviness of the movement. It worked.

She Has a Reverential Love of Dancers

Throughout the class, Jamison gave careful attention to how all the students were feeling, pausing at one point when a dancer's calf cramped up. She treated even the least experienced physiques with the utmost respect. It made sense later when, during a Q&A, someone asked her about the electric response audiences have to company performances:

"It's about identification with the dancers, and Alvin's appreciation of those dancers," she said. "To him, dancers were gold. They're a treasure. He saw rehearsal as a sacred space, and the stage was a sacred space to share with the audience."

And for all of her many accomplishments, what she professed to be the "greatest joy" in her life was not building on Alvin's legacy, running the Ailey company, or debuting works like *Cry*. It's passing those works on to other dancers.