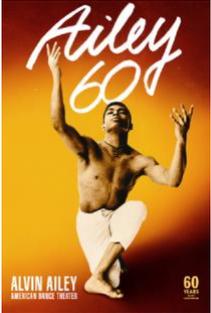


Alvin Ailey 60th Year Celebration: Judith Jamison, Robert Battle and More Honor the Legacy of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

By: Janice Williams

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When Alvin Ailey set out to start his own dance company in New York City in 1958, he likely had no idea his passion and call to dance would result in a nearly 85,000-square-foot performance center bearing his name and thousands of students entering its doors day after day, while company dancers traveled to perform his choreography on stages around the globe. He certainly couldn't have known his effort to create a safe and esteemed place for dancers from all walks of life would extend well past his 1989 death, some 30 years.

Yet, here we are now, 60 years after Ailey first launched the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and the performing arts theater as well as its educational component, The Ailey School, is still flourishing exceedingly. The Ailey center is honoring the life and blood memories of Ailey with its special "Ailey Ascending" 60th-anniversary celebration, including worldwide performances of Ailey's most revered choreography with the addition of new works created as a thank you to the mastermind behind the theater and school.

Newsweek talked to Judith Jamison, the Artistic Director Emerita who helmed the company from 1989 to 2011, her successor Robert Battle and a number of company dancers about the significance of Ailey's legacy. Read Newsweek's interview with a few members of the Ailey company below.

Judith Jamison, Artistic Director Emerita

What does the 60th anniversary mean to you?

It means generations of dancers and audiences have been sharing the love of what Mr. Ailey created 60 years ago. It takes [the audience], the incredible dancers in the company, our school and Mr. Ailey's genius to get to where we are now. We're living on his afterburn, we're living on the life he left us. The 60th anniversary is about celebrating the African American cultural expression and experience in the modern dance tradition of our country and serving our communities, but it's also about the love of a man who was a creative genius, who loved people. Mr. Ailey loved people, all walks of life, and he wanted his dancers and his company to be so accessible to everyone. It wasn't elitist, it wasn't only for certain people. It was for everyone. He always said, "Dance came from the people and should be delivered back to the people." And it's true. So we're living on the seeds that he planted 60 years ago.

Do you think he expected the company to go on for this long?

I don't know if he ever thought it was gonna continue this long or that we loved him this much to continue operating. If he was here today, I know he'd be smiling from ear to ear. He'd be so proud of us, as I am proud of the company now and the magnificent job they're doing on tour around the world, teaching. Think of where we started. He started with eight dancers and one performance. Here we are 60 years later in the beautiful state of the art Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater with outreach programs, extension programs, BSA programs and kids coming to study with us. Parents are bringing them as early as age 2. The junior students, the senior students, the professional students—it just goes on and on and on. Ailey camps, all over. Ten camps! It started with just one in Kansas City. Mr. Ailey thought this up. We're living on his dreams. We celebrate him every time the company comes on stage and that curtain goes up. When that dance starts, we are celebrating Alvin Ailey and what he did for us.

Robert Battle, Artistic Director since 2011

What does this 60th anniversary mean to you?

It means Mr. Ailey's legacy continues to thrive, not just survive. For a modern dance company, actually any arts organization, longevity can be very difficult. When you think about a company surviving the death of its founder, Alvin Ailey, to now me being only the third artistic director after Judith Jamison, for it to continue to grow, to have our own permanent home with all of this wonderful space in New York City, I think it serves as a time to look back and reflect on where the company started and where we are today. So it really is an opportunity to reflect and then to spring forward into the future.



CTRL + Click photo to watch Ailey dancers perform to Beyoncé's "Freedom"



People always say how Mr. Ailey was passionate about giving other dancers the chance to showcase their choreography. You recently introduced a few new pieces into the repertoire for the 60-year celebration. Was that intentional?

It's important because it's a part of the continuum. That sense of nurturing new voices, new dances, new choreographers, it is vital to this organization because that means we have a future. So nurturing choreographers, as much as it is a selfless act it's a selfish act in the sense of needing those voices so that we can continue. There is certainly something in the culture of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater that is very much about paying it forward. That, to me, is the lifeblood—certainly in the African American community—this idea of when you get over you reach back and you bring back as many people as you can. So beyond it being a programmatic thing, it really is a part of the heartbeat of this company because Alvin Ailey was so generous that way. That really is the foundation of this company.

Constance Stamatiou, Company Dancer since 2007

What does this 60th anniversary mean to you?

It's 60 years of keeping a man's vision alive, his legacy. It's inspiring. This was a small dream that he had and look how grand it's become! I wonder what he'd think about Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater now? Did he ever think his company would be this big, traveling all over the world and having so many outreach programs accessible for people everywhere of all ages? It's really special to be a part of.

How does it feel to be a young woman so heavily involved in maintaining the history and everything Mr. Ailey set out to do when he first launched the school and theater 60 years ago?

It's been quite the journey. I moved to New York from North Carolina to study at SUNY Purchase and I had a teacher there who taught at [Ailey's] summer program. She brought me to the summer program, and when I came here I was just in awe. I had never seen so many kids that looked like me, brown kids, in class. Growing up, I was usually the token girl in class. So I was awestruck about that and about the quality [in the way] the students were moving. There was so much passion, so much fire. It's just something about Mr. Ailey's choreography that touches everybody's soul. It draws you in. It's something you can relate to—how he always talks about "Revelations" being about his blood memories, growing up in the south in Rogers, Texas. Being a part of a company that celebrates all races and made a leeway for people of color to be involved in this art is truly extraordinary. I'm very grateful to be a part of.

Courtney Celeste Spears, First-Year Company Dancer

How does it feel to be a part of such a rich dance legacy created by Mr. Ailey, a black man from Jim-Crow south?

It's magical to walk on to a stage every day and being constantly reminded that there's so much more and you're a part of something that is so much larger than yourself. To walk into this space that's honoring 60 years of a legacy and tradition and honoring the mastermind, the genius behind all of it, is quite special. It's such a privilege and honor to be a part of something so grand.



Why is it important to spread Mr. Ailey's legacy now in today's society?

One of the most beautiful things about art and dance specifically is that it brings people together. It's something that unites people from all backgrounds, races, ethnicities, religion. It's timeless. One of the biggest things we're told all the time is that Mr. Ailey said, "Dance came to the people and should be given back to the people." We're in a time now where there's so much tension surrounding race and ethnicity and what you look like and political differences, but one of the beautiful things I think the Ailey company and Mr. Ailey has given us is timeless quality and energy that no matter where you're coming from in the world, no matter what language you speak, what political party you're with, your race—Ailey's work hits you at a core level, your soul. It's human.

It's so important to have places like this where people can feel united in what they're watching and the experience they're having when coming to see the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. It's so important for young brown girls and boys and Latino boys and girls and Asian girls and boys to see people that look like them on stage thriving and not being portrayed as anything other than the beautiful God-given creatures they are and to see their history being explored and executed in complete living motion on stage. It's also great to teach people about a history that they might not be familiar with, people who did not grow up understanding African American hymns, rituals and baptisms or what it meant to grow up in the south for someone like Mr. Ailey.

That's the history for some audience members and it's a full circle moment for them, but for some, I feel like Mr. Ailey's work shows them a completely different perspective of what the black body can do and the way we celebrate it.

Solomon Dumas, Company Dancer since 2016

What does it mean to be a part of the company during this milestone achievement?

It means everything to me. Being an African American man and being able to have this platform to share my passion and to know that this has lasted 60 years and it's still thriving and it's still valid, it's still current, I'm blessed and thankful. I'm full of gratitude that we're still able to tour. The organization is still growing. I'm thankful for the organization because it's given me an opportunity to travel the world. It's given me the opportunity to be educated and be an ambassador. I'm really proud to be a part of an organization that celebrates the African American heritage in the modern dance tradition. We use dance as our way of educating people. We travel the world, we travel the country and we share our black excellence. We're still doing the work to acknowledge our own presence and our contributions as African Americans and this organization has put so many people on the map. It's helped artists of color, dancers of color, choreographers of color, lighting directors of color, costume designers of color, composers of color. Ailey company celebrates that heritage and has been doing so for 60 years.

What is the biggest thing you've learned from your experience with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater?

The black experience is valid and it needs to be shared. Mr. Ailey created a piece called "Revelations" and it's one of the most famous works he's choreographed. It was choreographed in 1960, and it was a very prolific piece at that time and it still is. The thing about "Revelations" is it's based off his blood memories. His earlier character works are based off his blood memories of growing up in the segregated south, so it's his point of reference, his history. Of course, growing up in the segregated south at that time, the church was the hallmark of civilization for black people. He choreographed that piece based off his memories, but it shows our humanity, that we are human too and we experience joy and pain. It's a triumphant story nonetheless. No matter what you throw at us we tackle it, we persevere. And so that is the story that everybody can relate to. It's an unspoken communication and there's no denying this is a black piece that celebrates the black experience, but it's almost like a piece of history encapsulated. It's a period piece that shows you the African American story and how triumphant it is and how persevering it is and that transcends itself throughout the organization.