



The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater celebrates 60 years of modern dance and creative expression

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Dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey gathered a handful of modern black dancers in 1958 to perform with him at New York's 92nd Street YM-YWHA. It was here that the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, as well as Ailey's vision for a more inclusive world of the art form, was born.

Since then, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has grown to include 32 dancers who have gone on to perform more than 235 works for an estimated 25 million people across six continents. This season, the dance company celebrates its 60th anniversary.

Judith Jamison, its artistic director emerita, is especially proud of this accomplishment. She has watched the company become a cultural force since she joined as a dancer in 1965. Jamison became a close friend of Ailey while he created a wide array of roles for her, including the solo *Cry*. Ailey wrote the ballet for Jamison as a birthday present to his mother in 1971.

Jamison recounts how her friend was like a “chameleon when he was choreographing.”

“He could show you every single part, every single person he wanted you to be,” she told NBC News’ Rehema Ellis. “He could demonstrate who that person was. He could tell you about that person. He loved being around people, all kinds of people; not just dancers.”

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Jamison went on to lead the company for 21 years after Ailey asked her to succeed him as artistic director before he died in 1989.

“I think he's smiling,” she said. “I think he is just so proud of the continuation of his legacy. And he always says, it's not about me. It's about you.”

Robert Battle, who succeeded Jamison as artistic director in 2011, said that the company can help bridge a divided nation, by not only entertaining, but also educating.

“You know, dances have the luxury of ambiguity, so that we can give you sometimes a hard truth, but everybody in the audience will get — take away something else,” he explained.

“But the notion of it being the truth is very important; that we not only entertain but we educate. I mean, that is an important ingredient in what modern dance is, and certainly what we do.”

Jacqueline Green, a 29-year-old dancer who is in her eighth year with the dance company, told NBC News how much she admires its mission of inclusion and activism.

“This was one of the first companies where I saw myself represented on stage as a dancer,” she told Ellis.



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“I think that's what Mr. Ailey wanted when he started the company, which is a beautiful thing, because then, when he started it, there weren't many opportunities for people of color to perform, people of color to choreograph,” she said. “So he opened those opportunities up and it's just blossomed, because everyone has a story.”

Ailey continues to inspire members of the younger generation today, including students from the Ailey School.

“Seeing him as a black, African-American male be so successful is really inspiring to me,” Jeremy Villas, a 14-year-old junior division dancer, said. “And, like, gives me hope that I can be, one day, just like him when I'm older.”

On their tour, which kicks off this month, Battle will continue to lead the company in inspiring others and celebrating its 60th anniversary. They will be stopping in 21 cities coast to coast including Washington, D.C., Miami, Chicago, Los Angeles and Boston. The theater's younger company, Ailey II, will also be making stops in North America and abroad.

“When people see the company and see themselves reflected on that stage or see something that is a message of hope, that ... that is vital, you know, that, yes, we feed the belly but we feed the soul,” Battle said. “And sometimes that's even more important.”