

## Judith Jamison Takes Us Through 60 Years of Alvin Ailey's Brilliance

By: Britni Danielle

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When Judith Jamison joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1965, there were 10 dancers in the company. Today, six decades after Ailey and a small group of black dancers gave their inaugural performance at the 92nd Street Y in New York City, his legacy now includes more than 250 original ballets, 30 dancers, a robust educational and training program, and sold-out performances all across the globe.

According to Jamison, who Ailey picked to lead the company as its artistic director in 1989, working with the visionary founder was "a spiritual experience."

"When you're working with someone who you love working with it's like a spiritual experience," she says via phone from her home in New York. "There's an intimacy involved that when you have a rehearsal you're standing in a really sacred place and when someone's creating something you, or if you're writing something, it's a very special place to be."

While many have often cited Jamison as Ailey's muse, the veteran dancer says everyone he worked with inspired him in some way.

"We're all a part of his legacy, generation by generation," she explains. "But if you had the pleasure of having this man stand with you to push forward your blackness, your heritage, your history, your culture and say, 'You kings and queens get out on the stage and show what excellence is and how much you love doing what you're doing — and you better be good at it,' you can't help but feel blessed, according to Jamison.

As the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater prepares for its Lincoln Center season, what better way to reflect on the impact of Ailey's genius than by taking a look at some rarely-seen images from over the years and talking with Jamison, one of the people who worked closely by his side and knew him best.

### Life Lessons From Mr. Ailey

"There are a few of us left who actually worked with Mr. Ailey," Jamison says, noting she still calls him Mr. Ailey out of respect for her mentor. One lesson that has stuck with her over the years is that he always reminded each dancer to stay humble.

"Remember where you came from, always have that in mind," Jamison says, repeating Ailey's advice. "Remember this gift that you have, who you have to give it back to, and who you have to share it with."



According to Jamison, Ailey would also remind the dancers to ask themselves, "Who are you doing these performances for anyway? Is it to make yourself feel all puffed up, or to share something with the audience that brings them back to their humanity, and brings them back to who they are as people?"

For Jamison and Ailey, the answer was clear.

Ailey's Legacy? Excellence

Though millions of people have seen the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in person, Jamison doesn't believe the visionary behind it all was thinking about the impact of his work after he was gone. "When you're in it, and you're actually doing something, you're thinking of what you're doing," she explains.

But that doesn't mean Ailey did not have a distinct point of view. "We knew we were celebrating the modern dance tradition of our country, our culture, and our traditions," she says. "Beyond that, we knew about the generosity of the art form. If you could dance, he would say, 'If you were blue with polka dots then you could be in this company if you were excellent.'

"The mantra of excellence and loving what you do, and being who you are as a person — and loving yourself and understanding yourself, and keeping that clear — was clear to him," she says.

### Very Black, Very Proud



When he started the dance company in 1958, Ailey wanted black folks to control their own narratives and the way their stories were told.

"I think that he was thinking that we needed our images — our multi-layered selves — exhibited on stage. We were being seen in a certain light and portrayed by other people, and he thought it was very profound to say something about our culture — our African American culture, where it came from, and what's happened in the diaspora, and how we created our culture here [in America] that has its roots in the Motherland. He was saying all that," Jamison explains.

"But [did he know] that this would end up being a 60-year institution? That his name would be heralded forever? I doubt it," she says. "Because when you're in the creative process you don't think that — you hope.

"He was trying to get the work done of telling the truth about who we were as human beings and creative people of great intelligence, and understanding that we needed to purvey that truth in the works that we did."

### The Community Matters

Ailey didn't just believe in taking his dancers on the road to perform at venues around the world, he wanted to touch those who couldn't make it to the theater as well.

"It was very important for us to connect to the communities that we served from the beginning, before they started talking about outreach. We were reaching out already," Jamison says.



"The whole mantra of Ailey is that we're not just dancing on stage. We go outside and give master classes, lectures and demonstrations, and workshops to people who might not get to the theater," she says.

### Thinking Globally

A year after Jamison joined the company, Ailey took the dance troupe to Africa for the World Festival of Black Arts, a month-long celebration in Dakar, Senegal.

"It was huge. Langston Hughes was there, and Duke Ellington, and Katherine Dunham, and everyone from the diaspora, and everybody from all over the continent," Jamison recalls. "So, I have all those memories, but it's how I can sit in the audience now and watch these extraordinary dancers continue his legacy."

The World Festival of Black Arts wasn't the only time Ailey hit the road. The company also traveled to Paris, Brazil, and in 1967, Ailey toured nine countries on the African continent in just two months. According to Jamison, the trip was a revelatory experience.

"When you grow up, as my generation did, and see all these Tarzan movies and all these pretend African things, and then you actually step off the plane and you smell it, sense it, and taste it, oh my God, is that a revelation!"



#### It's All About the Truth

For Ailey, according to Jamison, telling the truth was paramount. "Being direct and truthful about the black experience, and taking it around the world, says something to other people who are still crazy about this company 60 years later," she says.

"They're watching your truthfulness and who you are, and they connect to what you're doing as human beings," Jamison continues. "So that's why the company can go around the world and everybody understands what we're talking about. He's giving everyone the opportunity to see this predominantly black company and see them do all kinds of dance, influenced by all kinds of culture."

"When people see excellence and truthfulness in dance, and they see committed people on the stage who are trying to tell you something about who you are — because they already know who they are — it just works. And that's why I believe the company is so globally understood because Mr. Ailey was so specific about telling the truth about who we are as people," she says.

Jamison credits Ailey's commitment to the truth as one of the things that has helped the dance company remain relevant and popular for the past six decades.

"If you're telling the truth it'll last," she says. "If you are clear on your purpose, and who you are and what you have to give to this world — what you have to say about not dancing in a vacuum, but dancing for people. This is not an elitist art form. Dance is for people. Dance came from people and needs to be delivered back to people. Mr. Ailey always said that.

"If you get up there and do something phony, people will know it and word will go around. But word goes around brilliantly about Mr. Ailey because he was true to his art form, he was a genius of a choreographer, and he also embraced everyone else by being specific about who he was and who we are."

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will conclude its North American tour this month, before beginning its Lincoln Center season in New York City in June.

