



LOUISE GUBER—THE IMAGE WORKS FOR TIME

REJOICING: The troupe danced *Night Creature* and other repertory classics

# BACK TO THEIR ROOTS

The Ailey company's tour leaves South Africa dancing in the aisles

By **THOMAS SANCTON** JOHANNESBURG

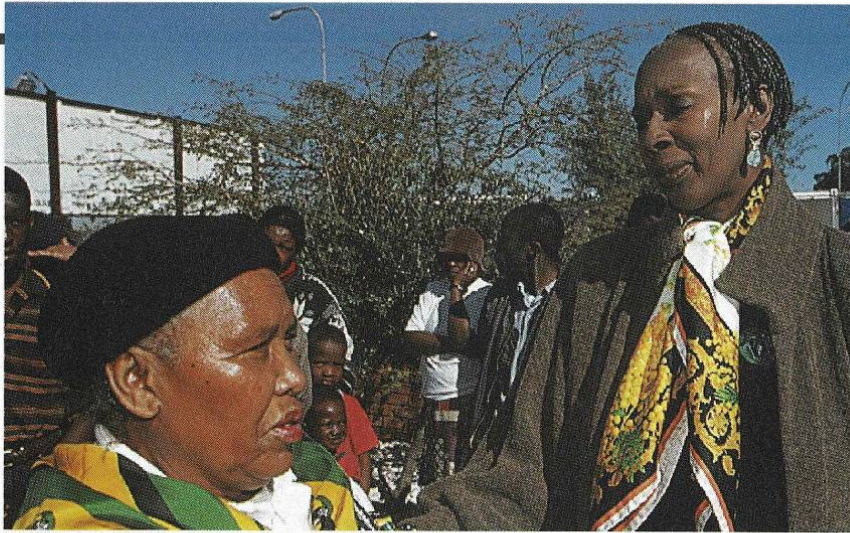
**T**EARS WERE THE FIRST BOND. They glistened on Judith Jamison's face as she stood beside an elderly woman veteran of South Africa's liberation struggle. They trickled down the cheek of a younger South African woman who knelt beside the flower-strewn memorial to her brother, felled by a police bullet on June 16, 1976, the first day of the Soweto uprising. After lighting candles, the kneeling woman and three other family members softly intoned their new national anthem, *God Bless Africa*. "That's when I lost it," Jamison said later. "I identified with them as black people, and immediately the image of slavery came into my head. This is an extraordinary survival and triumph. That's why I'm glad we came here."

Jamison, artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and 28 members of her internationally acclaimed troupe began an emotional 15-day tour of South Africa last week. In Johannesburg, Pretoria and the sprawling black township of Soweto, the troupe presented hands-on workshops and dazzling stage performances of Ailey classics, including *Night Creature*, *Vespers* and *Revelations*. Enthusiastic audiences clapped, whooped and sometimes danced in the aisles.

It is the first time that the Ailey company, the pre-eminent African-American dance troupe in the U.S., has visited the African nation, long deprived of access to international artists by the cultural boycott of the old apartheid regime. South African officials hailed the visit as a major event. "This is the end of a long drought," said Johannesburg executive-

committee chairman M.C. Matjila after the premiere performance Thursday night in the city's Civic Theater. "We are back in the international arena and able to host world-famous theater groups like this. It gives us pride after what we fought for all these years." Calling the tour "an inspiration for the whole metropolitan area," Johannesburg Mayor Isaac Mogase proclaimed June 18 as Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Day.

The trip has been Jamison's dream ever since Nelson Mandela's release from Victor Verster Prison Farm in 1990 signaled the beginning of the end of apartheid. "I feel like I'm coming home," said the majestic 54-year-old former dancer who took over the company following Ailey's death in 1989. "This is my homeland, my lineage. South Africans are not the same as African Americans, but we greet each other as brothers and



LOUISE GUBER—THE IMAGE WORKS FOR TIME (2)

**REUNITING:** Jamison, right, shared a tearful moment with Nora Monaheng of the African National Congress at a ceremony honoring children killed in the 1976 Soweto uprising

sisters because we've both been through turmoil and we understand that. We have so much to learn from them, and they have a lot to learn about us."

The job of turning Jamison's dream into reality fell to the company's executive director, Sharon Luckman, who had to find \$300,000 to cover the cost of the trip. Initial overtures to potential American underwriters got nowhere. Nor were funds forthcoming in South Africa, because, says Luckman, it is deemed "politically incorrect to raise money for foreigners to come here when so little was going to local arts groups." The project was about to be abandoned when the J.P. Morgan Bank, based in New York City, agreed to sponsor the tour to showcase its start-up this year of a Johannesburg branch.

**T**HE NEXT HURDLE WAS TO WIN support from South Africa's Dance Alliance, an influential union that has an effective veto over performances by visiting dance groups. "We've had a lot of foreign companies coming here," says Dance Alliance arts administrator Jill Waterman. "They'd just perform and leave, and that caused a lot of resentment. We were very insistent that we didn't just want Ailey to perform but to provide role models and give classes to our young dancers." Reassured by a personal phone call from Jamison, the alliance finally gave the green light. It organized an outreach effort that sent Ailey's dancers out into schools and community centers before they even went onstage.

These encounters ranged from all-black groups in the townships to integrated classes in the cities. At the Klipspruit recreation center in Soweto, black grade-school kids sat on the edge of their chairs and cheered while four Ailey dancers gave a lecture-demonstration. At Johannes-

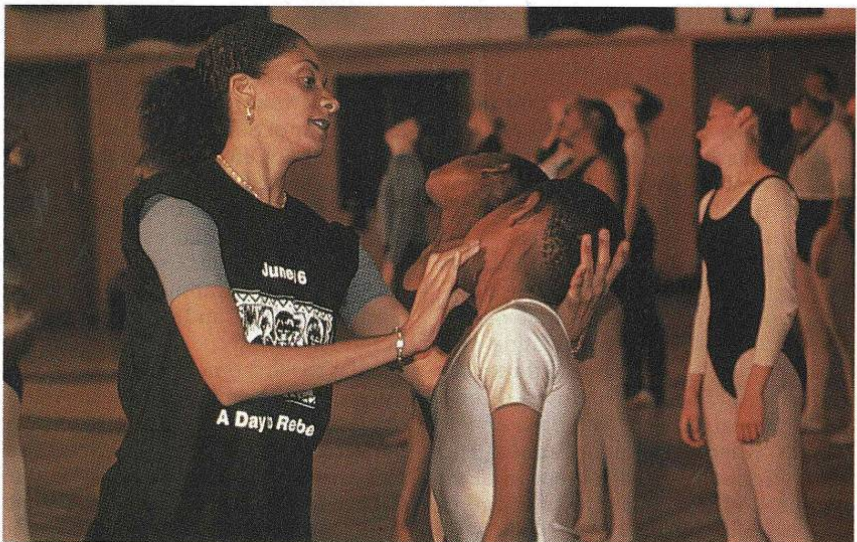
burg's National School of the Arts, the country's leading performing-arts high school, Ailey instructors shaped an integrated group of students into a troupe that credibly performed a segment of Ailey's signature piece, *Revelations*. And in Soweto's Orlando Community Hall, a local dance group, dressed mostly in T shirts and ripped blue jeans, danced a high-voltage routine from *Suite Otis*, a favorite from the Ailey repertoire choreographed by George Faison to the pulsating soul music of Otis Redding. The students' ecstatic whistles, cheers and shouts had Jamison grinning on the sidelines, and finally joining in the dancing.

For many of the African Americans who make up the large majority of the Ailey troupe, the link to their ancestral past was profound. "I feel as though I'm connecting to my roots," said Vikkia Lambert, 25. "It's exciting being here, but it's also a feeling of being part of the family." Noted fellow dancer Richard Witter, 29:

"It's like returning to where it all started."

Black South Africans seemed to share the feeling of kinship. "Your company has a grounding in soul that is linked to Africa," said Jackie Mbuyiselwa Semela, 35, the dreadlock-coiffed director of the Soweto Dance Theater, during a question-and-answer session. "It shows that you may have gone to other countries, but you cannot take the soul of the people away." Said Soweto resident Mary Elliot, 16, an aspiring dancer: "The way they move is not American at all—it is African. It's the same people, just a different country." Such responses have raised hopes that the tour will have a long-term effect on dance in South Africa. "Their visit could convert people to becoming more interested in dance and thereby grow the dance community," says Darryl Accone, arts editor of the Johannesburg *Star*.

Hovering over South Africa last week was the spirit of Ailey, the brilliant Texas-born dancer and choreographer who, guided by the central tenet "Dance came from the people—we must take it back to the people," formed his company in 1958 as an incubator for contemporary black dance and nurtured it into a major American cultural icon. "There are times on stage when I speak to Alvin before I perform and ask him to guide me," said Nasha Thomas, 35, an 11-year veteran of the company. At the first performance, Thomas drew a thunderous ovation with her wrenching 16-minute solo performance of *Cry*, the dance Ailey choreographed as a tribute to black women. On Thursday night, the dancer was black. She was beautiful. She was proud. And in many ways, she was at home. So too was Alvin Ailey. ■



**REACHING OUT:** Company members such as Toni Pierce, above, conducted workshops for young dancers in all-black classes in the townships and integrated groups in the cities