

By: Greg David
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JUDITH JAMISON **ARTS**

Judith Jamison became the most recognized dancer in the U.S. under the tutelage of Alvin Ailey and then succeeded him as artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the country's leading modern dance company, with an operating budget of \$40 million. Now 74, she is artistic director emerita of the thriving cultural force in New York.

How did your collaboration with Alvin Ailey happen?

Alvin was a genius as a choreographer who understood that his truth was about celebrating the African-American experience in this country. To celebrate that, he engaged some of the most talented dancers in the world, who stuck with him through thick and thin.

How did you become the foremost dancer in America?

By the grace of God I was there when Alvin created a ballet called *Cry* in 1971. I had been in the company since 1965 and had received accolades. But the day *Cry* premiered, the audience screamed forever after the curtain came down as I was lying on the floor exhausted. The next day Clive Barnes of the *Times* wrote a review with my name in the headline. That hadn't happened before.

How did Ailey prepare you to become artistic director?

He was wholeheartedly running everything, not preparing his successor. But there were only 10 of us in the company, and we were all given responsibilities.

Ailey died of AIDS, as did other male dancers in the company.

We lost so many dancers, and that meant that the next generation had to rely on themselves to continue the tradition of dance that had been developed. We all knew we had to do more than survive. We had to thrive.

In your 1990 memoir, you never said he died of AIDS. Why?

His family 27 years ago didn't want it mentioned. I had to respect their wishes.

How do you measure his impact?

Some 5,000 people showed up at a service at St. John the Divine to honor him. Without Alvin we wouldn't understand what modern dance repertoire is. You wouldn't have a door that is open to all to understand the story of the African-American people through the world of dance.

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is described as an arts conglomerate. Do you agree?

Yes, I do. I am proud to say in October we are opening 10,000 square feet added to our 77,000-square-foot building [on the West Side of Manhattan] because of the determination of current artistic director Robert Battle to take another leap forward in our glass palace. We own it. We have an endowment. Name me another company like that.

In 1990 you wrote that accomplished black women were just not visible. Is that still true today?

We are getting there slowly, very slowly. There are many people in nooks and crannies of excellence we are not aware of—in science, real estate, all areas of life. How that exposure gets to be more, I haven't the faintest idea.

How has the city's ascent benefited the company?

We have grown with the city. People come from all over the world now for our dance school. ■

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WHO SHE IS Jamison discovered dance growing up in Philadelphia and was dancing in New York when Ailey hired her for his struggling company. She has performed all over the world, originally on tours sponsored by the State Department. As artistic director, she oversaw an enormous expansion of the dance theater.

THE STATE OF THE COUNTRY "This is nothing new. We have all been through this before, not just black people. We are like a hamster in one of those wheels spinning around and around."

AND NOW "I am me, the director emeritus. I am minding my business, and it's a wonderful life. And I don't twitch any more when I am watching performances."