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Alvin Ailey's muse tells a young artist what it's like to dance in her shoes

By: Nicole Lyn Pesce

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The dance legend who inspired some of Alvin Ailey's most iconic choreography is guiding a rising star to follow in her actual footsteps.

Judith Jamison met Ailey in a stairwell after bombing an audition in 1965, when she was 22. But that first misstep led to a 50-year career after Ailey invited her to join his new Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, which was showcasing black modern dancers just as the civil rights movement was also hitting its stride.

Jamison danced for 15 years before succeeding Ailey as his theater's artistic director in 1989, where she served for 21 years before retiring in 2011. And Jamison, now 75, is still helping the company move audiences — such as coaching Jacqueline Green, 28, to perform “Cry” as part of the company's 60th anniversary season this fall. Ailey choreographed this three-section solo specifically for Jamison in 1971 as a birthday gift to his mother, which takes the artist and the audience on a journey from slavery and loss through joy and triumph. It made Jamison a star.

“‘Cry’ is very difficult to do, physically and emotionally and spiritually. It's not one of those ‘kick-bang-boom-bah-split!’ pieces... it covers the gamut of emotions,” Jamison told Moneyish. “It's very hard to do — and she (Green) is exquisite.”

Jamison sat down with Green last month at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's 55th Street headquarters to share her journey and her advice in the seventh episode of Good Company, a Moneyish original series that matches millennials with veterans in their field for mentorship and conversation. (Watch the video.)

While their careers are decades apart, their first forays into dance follow a similar pattern: their parents encouraged them to enter the arts.

“I was a very gangly, long-legged girl at the age of six ... and fortunately both my parents were smart enough to make sure that all of my energy was directed toward the arts, dance particularly,” said Jamison. “But I was just having fun. Dance was like flying to me. As soon as you can get away from gravity, it's the most wonderful feeling in the world.”



She was discovered by celebrated dancer Agnes de Mille in class at Philadelphia's University of the Arts when she was 22. De Mille invited Jamison to New York to dance with the American Ballet Theatre, and the rest is history.

Green, who has been a dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for eight years, said that her mother encouraged her to start dancing while she was attending high school in Baltimore so that she'd have a well-rounded education.

“I fell in love with the artistry of it ... it's expressing myself,” she said. But it wasn't until a woman of color, Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell from Alvin Ailey, came to dance at her school that she realized this could be a career for her, too.

“I saw her in class and I thought, ‘Wow — this woman is beautiful, and she looks just like me, and she's dancing and it's her career — and people are paying her for this,’” said Green, who then began researching the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's company's history. “That's when I actually realized that it was something that I could actually pursue.”

Green was excited to pick Jamison's brain about her own experience breaking into dance as a woman of color. Jamison credited her parents. "I grew up in the 40s. The 60s were coming, all of this turmoil is going on around you, the civil rights movement is about to happen, racial turmoil was going on — and my parents protected me so much from that," she explained. "They said, 'Get your education, and please understand that you must be good at what you're doing.' You have to be excellent (in dance.) You have to be good at this. There's no way you can go up the side of a mountain without understanding the technique of climbing that mountain — and that the top may not be in sight, but you're gonna get to where you need to be to fly."



And she reminded Jamison that live theater, like life itself, is full of falls and missteps. "The advice that I give performers today who beat themselves up about making mistakes is to just think of it as life," she said. "We're going through life making errors all the time, but then we're still here, and we're still living and breathing. Dancers recover quickly, don't we? There's no way you're going to stay down there."

Watch here: <https://moneyish.com/video/judith-jamison-on-dancing-for-a-living-and-loving-it/4B9EB6D2-A5D5-49C2-B74C-34FA17850795.html/>