How Judith Jamison Started Dancing for Alvin Ailey

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“Cry is Alvin’s work but, when I
dance it, it is mine, too,” Jamison
said in the November 1972 issue
of Dance Magazine of the iconic
solo Alley created on her. “Dance
is a very perfect thing. You give
yourself to it, yet you have to
prove your power over it.... I have
to make it happen!”

Simply Divine

“There is about her an aura of mysticism. She appears onstage, larger than life, more an apparition than a per-
former, compelling us to look upon her as we might a temple dancer—with a sense of religiosity, of awe.” Those were the
opening lines of Olga Maynard’s November 1972 Dance Magazine cover story on Judith Jamison, then in her late 20s and
at the height of her powers as a star performer with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Her professional start, however,
was far from assured: Though Agnes de Mille recruited her to dance The Four Marys with American Ballet Theatre when it
premiered in 1965, the contract was short-lived, leading Jamison to work nondance jobs (including as a ride operator at the
World’s Fair) while taking classes and auditioning. “Nothing in my life, until then, had prepared me for rejection,” she told
Dance Magazine. “Every time I was turned down I took it personally.” It was at one such unsuccessful audition that summer,
for Donald McKayle, that Alvin Ailey spotted her and decided to ask her to join his company. (“You mean, you decided to
take me that day, the day of the audition?” Jamison asked Ailey when the two told the story of their first encounter to May-
nard. “I went home and cried for three days until you called me!” Ailey replied, “Well, I didn’t know where to find you and
I had to get your phone number from Carmen de Lavallade and Carmen was out of town.”) Jamison would dance with
Ailey for the next 15 years (save for a brief period between 1966 and 1967 when the company disbanded), and returned to
lead the company in 1989 as Ailey’s handpicked successor. Now artistic director emerita, Jamison, who celebrates her 80th
birthday this month, is the recipient of a Dance Magazine Award (1972), a Kennedy Center Honor (1999) and a National
Medal of Arts (2001), and was inducted into the National Museum of Dance Hall of Fame in 2015. —Courtney Escoyne