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DANCE VIEW; Judith Jamison Adds Spices to The Ailey Brew

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A year after Alvin Ailey's death, his company has returned to New York (the season at the City Center ends next Sunday) in red-hot dancing shape, under new leadership and with new ideas.

Judith Jamison was the obvious choice to become artistic director of the company he founded in 1958. During the time she danced with the troupe, from 1965 to 1980, she became its most charismatic star. It would also be fair to say that Ailey's choreography molded her artistic development and that her esthetic and personal association with him was a close one. Nonetheless, as this season has demonstrated, she has quickly asserted her independence as an artistic director by adding new dancers and new programming, even choreographing in a style very different from Ailey's own.

Ailey himself was perhaps the first major dance company director to break with two key premises of the modern-dance tradition. Retiring prematurely as a dancer, he placed in doubt the first principle -- namely, that aspiring choreographers founded modern-dance troupes so that they could express themselves as dancers.

By the early 1950's, only Alwin Nikolais, in the modern-dance world (as opposed to ballet) had decided that dances need not be hammered out on the choreographer's own body. Atypically, he did not think of himself as a dancer. Ailey, however, saw himself as part of that tradition of choreographers who had a compulsion to dance and thus created the pioneering works of the 1930's and 40's.

The second principle of modern dance ruled that all the works in a choreographer's company should be his or her own. Ailey, instead, created the first genuine repertory company in modern dance that, like most if not all ballet companies, performs works by many choreographers.

The issue of succession here thus differs markedly from that facing other modern-dance companies. Because of the Ailey troupe's mixed repertory, there is no need to have only a choreographer at the helm, nor does any such choreographer provide all the works. Nor do they have to be exclusively in Ailey's own style. The director also need not be an active dancer.

In the current season's opening gala, however, Miss Jamison danced, stamping exuberantly, in a brief, clever curtain raiser, Kris World's "Read Matthew 11:28," and the program featured "Forgotten Time," Miss Jamison's own choreography. Ailey had encouraged her to choreograph and gave her first work, "Divining," a showcase in the company in 1984. In 1988, she introduced her own troupe, the Jamison Project, for which she created "Forgotten Time" last year.

It should come as no surprise then that she may still make cameo appearances as a dancer and present her own choreography. Nonetheless, there are changes.

One is the addition of six dancers from the Jamison Project, including Jonathan Riseling, a phenomenal dancer who had previously danced with the Ailey company. Another change is the emphasis in programming on experimental pieces, such as Lar Lubovitch's "North Star," set to music by Philip Glass. There are signs that

Miss Jamison wants to see the repertory tilt further toward formally oriented works that explore new ways of moving, to draw closer to what is happening elsewhere in modern dance.

The danger is obvious -- if the Ailey company followed current trends, it would blur its specific profile, which is identified with Ailey classics like "Revelations" and works inspired by the black heritage. Yet Ailey himself put into the repertory experimental works by Bill T. Jones, Kathryn Posin, Elisa Monte, Donald Byrd and Ulysses Dove (all of whom did pieces that favored repetition).

The solution is also obvious -- to balance the programming and even a single program. The emotional fervor that characterized the choreography of Ailey's own generation is still seen in the Ailey dancers' fantastic performances in works by the veteran choreographer Talley Beatty. "Come and Get the Beauty of It Hot" (1960) distills the streetwise tensions and subliminal violence of New York's barrios and ghettos. Mr. Beatty has changed the ending: A woman no longer swings in on a rope from the wings, to a crashing sound. But the passions of the big city are evident from the opening moment when Gary DeLoatch, in superb form this season, leads a finger-snapping ensemble.

Mr. Beatty has a way of his own with jazz dance, which is ingeniously melded with ballet and modern dance in the "Toccata" section. Two less-familiar sections have been restored; Marilyn Banks dances the blues perfectly, descending from a stepladder in "Rooftops and Stairwells," and Raquelle Chavis and Don Bellamy, expressively witty dancers, have a sharp punchiness in their comic combative love duet. Dereque Whiturs, all macho sleekness, shines in the breathtaking flamenco-flavored ensemble of "Congo Tango Palace."

Mr. Beatty (like Donald McKayle, whose early "Games" is being revived this season) should be persuaded to get the creative juices flowing again. "The Stack-Up," his antidrug rhythmic rhapsody, has received some of its best performances ever. Desmond Richardson, as the victim, gave the movement a blazingly, larger-than-life dimension, and David St. Charles was unusually grim as the drug pusher.

It is to Miss Jamison's credit that her own work "Forgotten Time," an abstracted ritual with movement invention that looks especially good upon detailed viewing, was balanced by another company premiere. Pearl Primus's "Impinyuza," a 1952 theatricalization of a ceremonial dance from Ruanda, opens up a more elegant vision of African dance than is usually seen in other companies. The Ailey men in it are uncommonly good.

The contemporary pieces are cool; the older ones simmer and come to a boil. Miss Jamison has added some new ingredients, but she has, so far, stirred the right brew.

Photo: Members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in the troupe's current staging of Pearl Primus's "Impinyuza"--uncommonly good (Angel Franco/The New York Times)

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