

Monday, December 6, 2010

pulsearts

The revelations continue

Leading Ailey has been right up her alley

By LEIGH WITCHEL

FOR Judith Jamison, there are no transitions. From star dancer with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to directing the company and now handing the reins to someone else, it's all seamless.

Or, as Ailey's tall, regal-looking champion, now 67, says, somewhat mystically: "The way I live my life is what is supposed to be there."

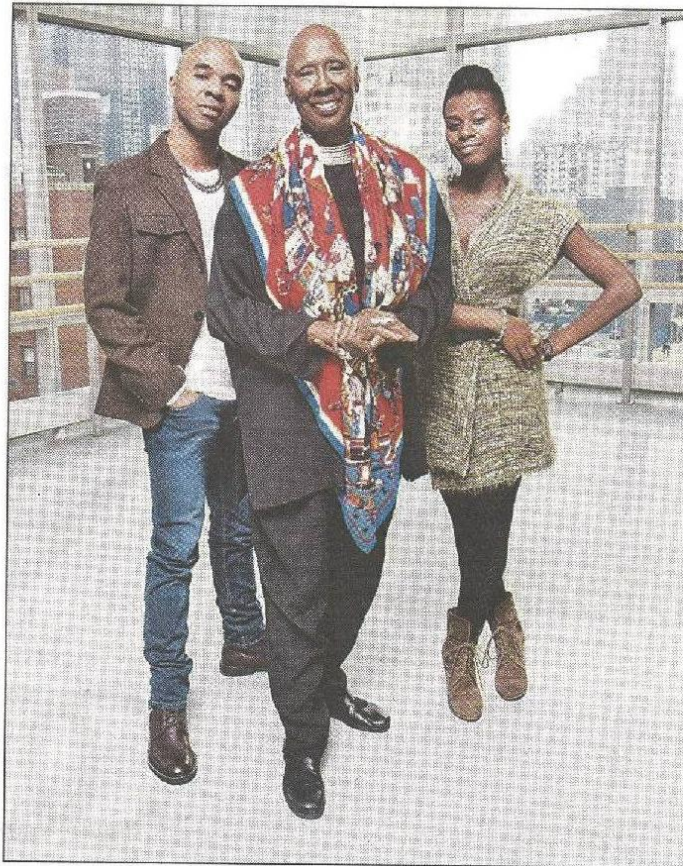
Born, raised and trained in Philadelphia, Jamison was plucked by Agnes de Mille in 1964 to dance with American Ballet Theatre.

A chance encounter brought her to Ailey. Auditioning for a TV special, the 5-foot-10 Jamison rushed out in tears, thinking her performance a disaster.

Ailey, who just happened to be there, disagreed: He called her a few days later and asked her to join his company.

Six years later, in 1971, he created the solo that became her signature, "Cry" — but she almost didn't make it onstage in costume.

"They made a dress, and it was



N.Y. Post: Tamara Beckwith

horrible," she recalls. "They had to run to Capezio to buy two leotards, cut the sleeves off of one to lengthen them and use my skirt from 'Revelations' — Ailey's signature work.

Jamison stayed with the company for 15 years, leaving in 1980

to star in Broadway's "Sophisticated Ladies."

But in 1989, Ailey died of AIDS, and she came back to lead his company.

"I knew he was ill and was going to die," she says now. "He asked me to do it. I loved Alvin,



Courtesy of the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation Archives

Judith Jamison, now in her final season leading the Ailey troupe, is flanked by guest artist and rehearsal director Matthew Rushing and dancer Rachael McLaren at the Ailey studios (left). Jamison, who joined Ailey as a dancer in the '60s, danced in Paris in the company's signature work, "Revelations," circa 1972 (above).

and that's why I'm here."

Under her guidance, the company received the National Medal of the Arts, among other honors, and performed at the White House.

But now, she's ready to move on. In June, she'll hand the com-

pany over to Robert Battle, 38, a Juilliard-trained choreographer who danced for David Parsons before founding his own group.

"I want this company to go on another 50 years, and I need some fresh blood in here," says Jamison, who was briefly wed to another Ailey dancer and has no children.

"I've worked on this transition for at least five years. I knew who I wanted. There are some things that Robert does — his mannerisms, the way he talks sometimes, that remind me of Mr. Ailey."

You could see their people skills at Wednesday's opening-night gala. Both Battle and Jamison addressed the starry crowd — Geoffrey Holder and the Rev. Jesse Jackson among them — with folksy humor and the calculated timing of old hands.

On the program was Battle's "The Hunt," a pounding showpiece that let Ailey's male dancers cut loose. Matthew Rushing, in fact, danced off part of his costume — finishing a section in nothing but black shorts, which added a little extra sizzle.

In fact, Jamison's 21st and final season heading the company promises to be a blockbuster, including a supersized version of "Revelations": Normally danced with 18 members, it will grow to 50, with everyone from the youngest students to the company's senior members dancing the piece that closes nearly every show.

And after the season ends? "Well, you'll see!" Jamison says. "I am a multitasking person."

We'll see, indeed.