



## Ailey Celebrates Judith Jamison at NY City Center

By Jennifer Dunning  
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Judith Jamison  
photo by Andrew White

*Twenty years after taking the helm of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Judith Jamison will retire in 2011. The company pays tribute to her work in its 5-week City Center season Dec. 2 through Jan. 3, 2010.*

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Judith Jamison was a big, gangling girl no one in dance knew quite what to do with. Alvin Ailey discovered her when she stumbled against him, fleeing a failed Broadway audition soon after she arrived from Philadelphia to look for work in New York. Intrigued, Ailey spent several days trying to find this "long drink of water," as he thought of Jamison, for his new modern-dance company.

Jamison had an attitude and opinions of her own. There was a sometimes tempestuous relationship. But Ailey created for her one of the great star solos of American modern dance in "Cry," a solo that summed up her unruly power and authority. And, always aware of dancers who might do more, he saw in Jamison a possible successor.

Jamison seems even larger than life today, 20 years after she took on the directorship of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. With her close-cropped head and unashamedly statuesque build, she has the look of an imposing African goddess. But her humor—her big rich irresistible laugh—has remained intact, finding a new outlet in her drawlingly irreverent front-of-curtain speeches over two decades. There are likely to be many of those speeches this season at City Center, a five-week anniversary tribute to Jamison in her last year before her successor is announced. She will retire officially in 2011.

That tribute includes a premiere by Ronald K. Brown, his fourth for the troupe, called "Dancing Spirit" after the title of her biography. Jamison herself has created a new piece, "Among Us (Private Spaces, Public Places)," which is set to music by Eric Lewis and takes place in a hip art gallery presided over by a mysterious genie. Anna Deavere Smith will appear onstage in Jamison's "Hymn," her own loving and perceptive tribute to Ailey.

Associate director Masazumi Chaya has put together compilation programs of works commissioned or revived during Jamison's tenure. And principal Ailey dancer Matthew Rushing has been invited to choreograph a dance, about the Harlem Renaissance, the latest company member chosen by Jamison to take that big step past performing.

Jamison has remained a very private person beneath her exuberant exterior. No talk for her about the emotions that might attach to these landmark events in her life—being named director and moving on soon from the post. Instead, she is full of news about her premiere and full of admiration, as always, for Ailey and the generations of Ailey dancers and staff members with whom she has worked. She is, as Mr. Brown comments, a "loyal servant" in the Ailey lineage.

Jamison's new "Among Us" began in part with an invitation from Geoffrey Holder to join him at work in his SoHo studio, crammed full of magical works and artifacts. Holder and his wife, Carmen de Lavallade, took

Jamison under their wing when she arrived in New York in the early 1960s and they have remained dear friends.

"Come on over," he told Jamison one day in 2003. "We're just going to play, like we're kids." The result of her experiments with china markers and tablets of paper, begun in Holder's studio and continued on her own over the years, will form a set through which characters stroll as they move into and out of their own private spaces in that stylish public place.

The past and present merge as Jamison talks of rehearsing in a large well-appointed studio that is the smallest studio in the company's gleaming West 55th Street headquarters yet palatial in comparison with earlier Ailey homes.

But the history remains and lives in at least one of the season's new works. Figures that might be Ailey and Jamison emerge from the journeying crowd in Brown's dance, which also contains allusions to Jamison's way of moving and to "Cry." The dance will celebrate, Brown says, a woman he would describe as "elegant, noble, generous." Those qualities shine through in Jamison's quiet musings about the surprises she found, both good and bad, as company director.

She is somewhat more patient now, she said. She storms out of the studio and "stops things very coldly" far less often. She has also gotten past obsessing over certain choreographic details, in part because poor Chaya was "trying to move things along."

"I fall back into my ways of being a perfectionist," Jamison admitted. "But then I remember what it was like for me. Everything was not perfection. The only thing I ask my dancers to do is aim for it, and aim high. And for me not to get frustrated, because we're all growing in individual ways. And that's a big lesson I learn every day. Let people have the freedom to grow in the ways that they do grow. And if they need a grand battement, I will give it instantly."

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[Click here](#) for tickets and further information on Alvin Ailey Dance Theater's City Center season.



Judith Jamison with AAADT members  
photo by Paul Kolnik