

The Washington Post

January 29, 2010

Jamison making the next leap

BY LISA TRAIGER

For Judith Jamison, returning to the Kennedy Center each year with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater feels like a homecoming, with the company's connections to Washington stretching back decades.

"We were there in '71 for the opening of the Kennedy Center, with Leonard Bernstein's 'Mass' — just a tremendous experience," the artistic director recalls. "Working with 125 singers, plus musicians, marching bands, dancers, was a regular circus, but somehow it all came together in this monumental piece."

But what makes next week's return to the Kennedy Center so poignant and bitter-sweet is that it may well be Jamison's last appearance there as the company's artistic director.

Jamison, 66, is stepping back from her leading role and looking toward another transition. "I'm still going to be very much a part of the Ailey family," she says, though her new position is still undefined and her successor has not been named. But believe her when she says, "I will not fall off the radar."

Jamison was among Alvin Ailey's most memorable dancers. At 5 foot 10, with a sturdy, muscular body, she became his muse in 1965 when she joined the young troupe. She left for a stint on Broadway and to form her own company, but when Ailey asked her in 1989 to take over, she didn't hesitate. "I knew he was dying. He just said to me, 'I'm not feeling well, and I'd like you to take the company.' I said, 'Of course, of course.' I knew how much he loved me and devoted so much to me. Without his great support and love... I would never have become what I am."

Audiences flock to Alvin Ailey performances as much for the dancing as for the

spirit-filled choreography, including the company's signature 1960 piece "Revelations," which will close each of the seven Kennedy Center performances.

To celebrate Jamison's legacy, next week's programs will also feature highlights from the company's most popular works, as well as new pieces. Ronald K. Brown, artistic director of the company Evidence, has created "Dancing Spirit," echoing the title of Jamison's autobiography. The work draws on music by Duke Ellington, Wynton Marsalis and War, and fuses movement from Cuba, Brazil and America in recognition of Jamison's worldwide influence.

Jamison's new work, "Among Us (Private Spaces: Public Places)," is set to a score by pianist Eric Robert Lewis. Jamison's paintings serve as a backdrop to movement drawing from Africa and India. "This is mine! My baby!" she exclaims. "I hold it close to my heart. . . . It's like a rock-jazz opera that's got everything from my fantasies in it."

Jamison sometimes sells her folklorish artwork but more often gives it to friends.

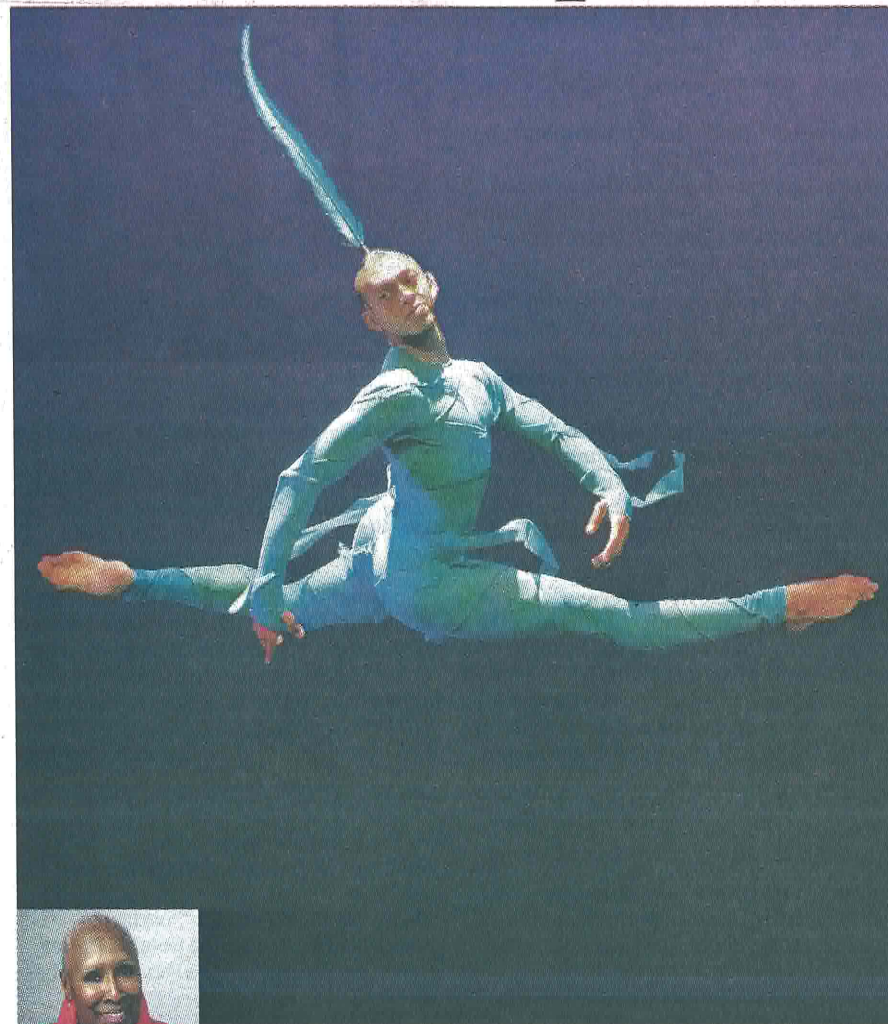
"The connection I find [with painting and choreography] is that you don't know what's going to go on that paper. It's like when a dancer comes into a studio, maybe other choreographers can start with the movement right away," she says. "But when I come into the studio, usually I'm inspired first by the music, then I look at the people who I have in front of me. They inspire me."

weekend@washpost.com

Traiger is a freelance writer.

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

Kennedy Center, 2700 F St. NW. Tuesday through
Feb. 7. 202-467-4600. www.kennedy-center.org.
\$30-\$89.



ABOVE PHOTO BY PAUL KOLNIK; JUDITH JAMISON PHOTO LEFT, BY ANDREW ECCLES.

Clifton Brown of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs Judith Jamison's "Among Us (Private Spaces: Public Places)." Jamison, left, will step down as artistic director next year.