

PEOPLE *are* TALKING ABOUT

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Dance: Judith Jamison and Alvin Ailey

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"People come to see beauty, and I dance to give it to them," Judith Jamison once said. Jamison may not be performing herself this year, but her particular brand of majestic sinuousness will dazzle audiences when Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater celebrates its fiftieth anniversary—and Jamison's twentieth as artistic director—with a special performance tonight to kick off their five-week New York season. The one-night-only opening performance at City Center will include *Here . . . Now*, a restaged Jamison piece originally commissioned for the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics in honor of track-and-field phenom Florence Griffith Joyner set to live, onstage music led by the inimitable Wynton Marsalis. One of the season's highlights includes the world premiere of *Dancing Spirit*, a tribute to Jamison by Ronald K. Brown with musical accompaniment by Duke Ellington, Marsalis, and War. The audience will also see Robert Battle's *In/Side*, a transporting solo with music by Nina Simone; a new production of Jamison's 1993 *Hymn*, her powerful Emmy-winning homage to Ailey; and *Divining*, Jamison's first ballet for the dance troupe. The company will also present *Among Us (Private Spaces: Public Places)*, a Jamison premiere set to original jazz compositions by Eric Lewis, as well as a "Best of 20 Years" program that includes excerpts from the nearly one hundred ballets that Ms. Jamison has commissioned or revived during her celebrated career.

A Philadelphia native, Jamison was discovered by Agnes de Mille, studied with Marion Cuyjet, and made her debut with American Ballet Theater in de Mille's ballet *The Four Marys* in 1964. But it wasn't until a fateful meeting that her life changed. "I went to an audition for a Harry Belafonte *Roaring Twenties* special for choreographer Donald

McKayle, but I failed," she says. "Mr. McKayle was such a gentleman, he kept me until the very end. I stumbled by a man on the steps who I didn't see, as I was crying and running home to call my mother. Unbeknownst to me, it was Alvin Ailey. He called me two days later and invited me into the company." After joining the Ailey troupe in 1965 as a dancer, she stayed on for a fifteen-year run as Ailey's muse until she left to found her own group, the Jamison Project. Nearly a decade later Jamison returned to the company to take the helm as artistic director after Ailey passed away unexpectedly. "I was privileged to work with Mr. Ailey," says Jamison. Her role in his *Cry* is the one that defined her. "I also carried the umbrella in *Revelations* and was the clown girl in another classic work, *Blues Suite*. But once I did *Cry*, I became the Mother Earth figure for Ailey onstage."

Jamison, 66, who has announced her retirement for June 2011, is not wanting for accolades. She has received a Kennedy Center Honor, an Emmy for Outstanding Choreography, a National Medal of Arts, France's Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters, a Bessie, and the distinction of being named one of Time's 100 most influential figures. But she feels that her greatest accomplishment "is that I continued the paradigm that Alvin set up in the first place. That dance should be for everyone."

Under Jamison's stewardship, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, which was recently recognized by Congress as a "vital American cultural ambassador to the world," has grown to 30 dancers, and wrapped its 50-city global tour (all told they have performed in 71 countries and on six continents, including two residencies in post-apartheid South Africa). She has also overseen the additions of AileyCamps, the Joan Weill Center for Dance (Ailey's eight-story midtown headquarters), the Ailey Extension, and a partnership with Fordham University to offer a BFA in dance.

In addition to her seminal choreography of works like *Reminiscent* and *Divining*, Jamison penned an autobiography, *Dancing Spirit*, that was edited by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis in 1993 and describes the ebbs and flows of her storied career. "As a dancer," she observes, "you really try to stay true to whatever the choreographer/artistic director is giving you. So, now the shoe is on the other foot and I have to trust everyone else—I have to trust the dancer. As I was trusted as a dancer, I trust my dancers."

As for tonight's festivities, Jamison says, "It's a party on opening night, but every night is a different experience, an excursion. We hope that audiences come in and get on the plane and take a ride, because we know how to fly. We really do." (Vogue)

—Genevieve Bahrenburg