

Q&A with Alvin Ailey artistic director Judith Jamison

By Howard Pousner

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

6:26 p.m. Monday, February 8, 2010

Judith Jamison has accomplished so much in two decades as artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, that she had to ask her office to fax a fact sheet to her hotel, during a Washington tour stop, so she could be reminded of it all before an interview.

“I mean, I do know,” she says with a laugh, “and the fruits of my labor are shown every evening on the stage.”

True enough. Ailey is parading those luscious fruits on a 20-city U.S. tour, commemorating Jamison’s 20-year tenure, that stops in Atlanta starting Thursday. The seven varied programs at the Fox Theatre include a “Best of 20 Years” piece featuring excerpts from the choreographers she has fostered during her tenure.

But she sounds most excited about two world premieres: Ronald K. Brown’s “Dancing Spirit,” in which the mythological figures Ogun and Oya represent the late Ailey and Jamison, who danced for the troupe for 15 years before succeeding the founder; and 18-year company veteran Matthew Rushing’s “Uptown,” which the New York Times praised as “a glittering love letter to the Harlem Renaissance.”



Paul Kolnik Judith Jamison, center, is celebrating 20 years as the artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Q: Ailey celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2009 and now the company is commemorating your 20th anniversary. I’m going to guess it’s all gone by in the blink of an eye.

A: Kind of, sort of. But I’m not even winding down, because once you’re an Ailey-ite, you’re an Ailey-ite [forever]. This man gave me such an extraordinary gift, a gift with a future.

Q: So why do you plan to retire next year?

A: It’s not a retirement actually, I’m just moving over. Let’s put it this way: I won’t have the title of artistic director. Remember, the idea of this company is past, present and future. I’m not going to be around for another 50 years. I’m looking for a future for this company, that’s the most important part of my decision-making.

I will still be a spirit caretaker. People need to be ready to have their ailerons opens. I’m here to give lift to this flight.

Q: Can you define what a spirit caretaker does?

A: Let’s just say [I’ll still be] attached at the hip, but the birds have to fly.

Q: What do you think of Ronald Brown’s tribute to you and Mr. Ailey on the current tour, portrayed by Matthew Rushing and Renee Robinson in the first cast?

A: Oh, my goodness. I cried when I first saw it. I cry every time I see it. You see lineage, you see generations, you see the progression of our company going along a path.

I’m proud of Renee, the only woman who’s been in the company 28 years, most with me. And I’m proud of Matthew because of his 18 years with us. I’ve known him since he was 16 years old!

Q: So I imagine you’re as proud as a mama over his choreography for “Uptown?”

A: I mean, he did his homework. He was at the Schomburg Center [for Research in Black Culture, in Harlem] more than anyone was at the Schomburg. “Uptown” is true, it’s authentic and it has poignant moments in it. It has definitive characters and takes you on a journey. He pays truth to the Harlem Renaissance. Well, you can’t do the whole Harlem Renaissance in a half hour, but what he does is what I expected of Matthew Rushing, as meticulous as he is.

Q: The company's an institution now, with a healthy endowment and its own glossy headquarter building in New York with 12 studios and a black box theater, not to mention considerable community outreach. But you remember the humble early days clearly, I bet?

A: I knew how difficult it was financially for this company because in the '60s, I watched Mr. Ailey work trying to get us bookings and trying to pay us. [There were times] we wouldn't get paid. We might get a little envelope with a thank you in it.

Q: What are you looking for when you audition dancers?

A: If you have a dancer who's just dance, dance, dance, dance, what you're going to get on stage is something with no dimension, that is flat. That's certainly not a reflection of what it is to live. So I look for that in dancers, I look for their experience, I look for their passion.

I don't care if they make a mistake in the auditions I give once a year. You can still see fine training, it comes through even if you slip.

This is a lifestyle. But the lifestyle includes living -- living a full life.

Q: Is it difficult to get talented individuals to work as a group?

A: You don't have to rev them up to work as a group. When you join Ailey you know you have to be this individual, this unique person I just hired because you don't move like anyone else I have in the company. But usually it's very easy to get into rank, because if you don't, somebody will shoot you a look besides the artistic director.

When it comes to working in the ensemble, you have to maintain your uniqueness but move as one. And they understand that ... and do it out of pride in the company and the way we look. The curtain goes up and people are there to see U.S., and there is honor in that and you step up to that honor.

Q: Your whole life has been so immersed in dance. When you're sleeping, do you dream of dance?

A: I don't remember most of my dreams. I'm sorry, I wish I did. I sleep like a log!

But I always come into rehearsal and tell dancers after I've given them difficult steps, I'll say, "I dreamed that. You had that third arm that could wrap around that way and grab that person that way while the two other arms were doing something else."

Q: But you really don't remember ...

A: No, but I do have visions when I'm choreographing, of course. It has nothing to do with dreaming. It's like I'm talking to you now, and I can see a movement right now, and I think, "Oh, that'd be nice to try on somebody."

Dance preview

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Thursday-Sunday at the Fox Theatre. Tickets start at \$20 via Ticketmaster, 1-800-982-2787, www.ticketmaster.com. At the Coca-Cola Family Matinee, 2 p.m. Saturday, get one half-price ticket with each full-price ticket purchased.