

Ailey fans bid Jamison a fond, raucous farewell

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By Jocelyn Noveck



NEW YORK – "I have come a long way from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania," observed Judith Jamison, retiring artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and American dance icon. "Yeah!" shouted back many in her adoring audience.

Farewell performances in the dance world are usually festive, affectionate affairs, but maybe not quite as festive and affectionate as the one Jamison's company threw her Sunday evening. The Ailey company has always known how to put on a great show, and they weren't about to falter on this big night.

"This is a such an important moment for such an important lady," said Jamison's incoming replacement, choreographer Robert Battle. He joked that people had been telling him constantly that he has really big shoes to fill. "But I wear size 13, so I'll be all right," he quipped to a crowd of more than 2,500 packed into City Center.

Turning serious, Battle added, "It's so important to see that we are part of a continuum." And that turned out to be a theme of the evening. As the company rolled out excerpts of its most popular works, beloved Ailey dancers from the past showed up to perform them.

They included George W. Faison, a company member from the late 1960s, performing in a saucy duet from "Suite Otis," which he choreographed in 1971.

But "Revelations," the company's signature work, predates even him. The company has been celebrating its 50th anniversary all season long, performing it virtually every

night. And while some critics have complained that Ailey relies too heavily on this particular past glory — the most popular work of modern dance anywhere — it's hard to see how the troupe could deprive audiences who clearly come wishing fervently to see it.

While "Revelations" closed the show, as it nearly always does, there were 13 other works that preceded it Sunday night on a greatest-hits style bill. Jamison, 67, with her distinctive spectacles and shaven head, sat in her usual seat at the back of the orchestra, taking it all in.

An arresting dancer with long, expressive arms, Jamison began her Ailey career in 1965 and quickly became the choreographer's muse. He picked her to succeed him before his death in 1989, and she has led the company for more than two decades. Just last September, Michelle Obama honored her at the White House, calling her "an amazing, phenomenal, 'fly' woman."

Among the Act 1 highlights was the work most closely associated with Jamison's career: "Cry," which Ailey created in 1971 in honor of his own and other black mothers, and which made Jamison a star. A powerful solo in three sections, on Sunday it was performed by three dancers in signature "Cry" flowing white skirts, two of them returning Ailey stars: Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell and Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, who joined current (and veteran) dancer Renee Robinson.

The second act contained a slew of crowd-pleasers. Jamison's own 2005 "Reminisce" paired former dancer Alicia Graf Mack with Jamar Roberts in a sensual, passionate duet. And her fast-moving "Love Stories," on which she collaborated with Robert Battle and hip-hop artist Rennie Harris, had the crowd whooping with pleasure at some of the quicksilver moves.

The most dramatic reaction, though, was saved for Clifton Brown in "Caught" — David Parsons' surefire gala favorite. In this 1982 work the dancer holds a strobe light and activates it in such a way as to make it appear he is literally floating on air, never touching the ground.

After the cathartic "Revelations," the show ended with Jamison appearing alone onstage, showered by colored streamers. Staff and dancers came out in groups, offering an endless supply of hugs and bouquets. It wasn't technically her last show as artistic director — the company now embarks on a 24-city national tour. But as the last performance in New York, where Ailey is based, it had an obvious sense of finality to it.

"One black man with a vision — and look what happened," Jamison said.