

Michelle Obama hosts first White House dance event

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Getty – The East Room of the White House is transformed into a dance studio during a workshop for students

WASHINGTON – In the end, it was a wonder the three massive chandeliers gracing the White House East Room remained intact, given the high-voltage expenditure of human energy taking place beneath them.

Tuesday's inaugural performance of the new White House Dance Series transformed the stately room into a stage for some of the world's most talented dancers to strut their stuff: Endless pirouettes, gravity-defying leaps, and some crazy one-handed spinning handstands, too.

Hosting the event was Michelle Obama, who brought along daughters Sasha and Malia — just home from their first day of school — and mom Marian Robinson, too. The first lady clapped along to some of the dances but leaped to a standing ovation when Dayton Tavares, one of Broadway's high-flying Billy Elliots, finished his song, "Electricity," with a virtuoso set of turns.

The emotional highlight of the evening, though, was the performance of "Revelations" by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, probably the most beloved work of modern dance in existence. It was especially poignant because the evening was a tribute to Judith Jamison, the Ailey company's artistic director and an iconic figure in the dance world who will step down in 2011 after two decades leading the company.



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Mrs. Obama called Jamison, 67, "an amazing, phenomenal, 'fly' woman."

"Let me tell you, your picture in 'Cry' was the only piece of art in our house," Mrs. Obama told Jamison, sitting in the front row. "Cry," a 15-minute solo dance of great dramatic power, was the Ailey work for which Jamison was most famous in her dancing years, and an excerpt of it was performed Tuesday by company member Linda Celeste Sims.

Tuesday's event, directed by former New York City Ballet star Damian Woetzel, began with an afternoon of workshops for some 90 or so dance students who traveled to the White House from schools all over the country.

Young girls in leotards, their hair tightly wrapped in buns, sprawled on the shiny East Room floor, stretching their legs into splits as they warmed up. Jamison watched with a smile on her face as current Ailey dancers then taught the kids excerpts from "Revelations."

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"Slow! Sloooooow," intoned teacher Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, urging the kids at one point to take their time with a stretch.

"Wow," Woetzel told the students after they were finished. "Now you've danced in the White House!"

After their workouts, the students had a quick break, cleaned up and returned for the performance, which also included excerpts of "Cloven Kingdom" by the Paul Taylor Dance Company, and Twyla Tharp's "Nine Sinatra Songs," danced by the Washington Ballet.

There was also a dizzying display of hip-hop acrobatics from Super CR3W, whose spinning handstands, headstands and similar moves evoked whoops of pleasure from the crowd. Not to be outdone, Ashley Boudier and Daniel Ullbricht of New York City Ballet showed that ballet can be equally energetic in its own way with a lively performance of George Balanchine's "Tarantella."

At the end, Jamison addressed the crowd. "Dance is the soul of this country!" she declared. "This is so American, it's ridiculous."

In a weekend interview, Jamison told The Associated Press how she'd been to the White House a few times before, but never for an event as exciting as this.

"What a rare opportunity, to be invited by your country's first lady to be honored like this," Jamison said. "This event is totally unique. It's so terribly important to recognize this art form and to understand how important it is to the fabric of this country."

"This will be another clarion call to people: Pay attention to your arts!" Jamison said.

Though the Obamas have spotlighted many varieties of music since they came to the White House — there have been events celebrating Latin music, rock, jazz, country, classical and Broadway show tunes — the dance world might have felt ignored, until now.

Woetzel, who is on the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, says there will be future performances in the dance series, but won't give details. "Let's just say there will be more dance," he said.

Mrs. Obama had the last word on Tuesday, telling the young people present that "If you've done it in the White House, you can do it anywhere!"

And, she said with a smile, "They didn't break the chandelier!"