

## Jamison wishes Ailey could see 50th anniversary

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Judith Jamison remembers standing backstage glowing with joy when President Barack Obama and his family received a standing ovation at a recent Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performance.

She wished her mentor was still alive to see it all.

"If only Alvin was there in the flesh," said the artistic director of the dance company, recalling the show at The Kennedy Center in Washington on Feb. 6. "But I know he was there in the spirit. He would have been so overwhelmed by the events. It's Black History Month, we have an African-American president and it's our anniversary."

The Ailey troupe is currently in the midst of a 50-city global tour, celebrating its 50th anniversary. The tour began in late March last year and is scheduled to end in mid-June, according to its Web site.

On Thursday, the New York-based dance group will start a four-day repertory in Atlanta.

"This tour makes me realize what a vision can do," said Matthew Rushing, a dancer with Ailey since 1992. "Mr. Ailey made dance more accessible, not only to all races and cultures, but to give his fellow dancers a chance to express themselves. He took this vision and soared with it."

Alvin Ailey's visions became a reality when he founded his company in 1958. At the time, the Texas-born dancer hoped to take his ensemble worldwide to promote black culture through modern American dance, fusing choreography with jazz and classical music.

Through Ailey's 1960 masterwork, "Revelations," his company became one of nation's most prestigious cultural institutions.

The company also helped dancers advance their careers. From George Faison to Ulysses Dove, many of them pursuing their own endeavors after Ailey — some as choreographers, on Broadway or television.

It was a thriving institution, but tragedy touched the company in 1989 when the 58-year-old Ailey died from a blood disorder called dyscrasia.

Jamison, who joined Ailey in 1965 as a dancer before venturing to Broadway to later start her own group, was brought back as the company's artistic director shortly after his death.

"Alvin wanted this to be the center of a universe of artists, students and people who just wanted to know what it was to move freely," Jamison said, "to understand the excellence and discipline of dance."

Not only did Jamison carry out his works, she also helped expand them. Under her watch, the ensemble's performance schedule was bulked up to about nine months a year, a bachelor's degree program was formed with Fordham University and a \$56 million headquarters was built in Manhattan in 2005.

A company that started with six dancers now has 30 lean-muscled men and women, who have performed for millions in over 70 countries.

"We're continuing on his legacy and tradition by going out to perform at these different cities, countries and continents," said Constance Stamatiou, a second-year tour dancer.

The company also does work in the community with AileyCamp, a program led by Nasha Thomas-Schmitt that reaches out to inner-city junior high school kids. The initiative, which is not a training ground for young dancers but instead focuses on building self-esteem, will take place in nine cities this summer.

"When he died, I felt the loss of him and wondered if there would be an Alvin Ailey anymore," said Jasmine Guy, who was with the dance company for four years in the early '80s. She eventually went on to star in the TV sitcom "A Different World" and now is a theater director.

"But since Judith took over, she gave it new life in addition (to) maintaining the classic pieces of Ailey," Guy added. "She's been able to make it flourish financially and make it the institution that it always has been."

In two years, Ailey will have to find someone new to lead the company. Jamison plans to step down from her position with the hope of finding a successor.

Matthew Rushing believes Jamison won't be too far away whenever she retires.

"Her presence will still be felt," Rushing said. "The vision will still be kept. The legacy will still continue. And if anything, it will be taken to an even higher level."

On the Net: [www.alvinailey.org](http://www.alvinailey.org)

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2009/02/19/entertainment/e043852S94.DTL>

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