

Dance Pioneer Hangs Up Her Shoes

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By Selma Chalabi



The company was formed by Alvin Ailey in 1958

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is currently on tour in the UK.

It will be the last time it tours here under the stewardship of one of America's leading dancers and directors, Judith Jamison, who promises something unusual for her swansong.

"People will be surprised," says Jamison.

"We can't be put in a box. The company now has a mix of races and nationalities. It's about excellent dance, a wonderful cornucopia of

"An Ailey dancer doesn't just do the steps. An Ailey dancer shows you who you are through the movement. Get to the theatre, because you're going to go on a rollercoaster journey you haven't been on before."

Someone who cannot wait to go on that journey is Ruth Till, dance enthusiast and former director of Rubicon Dance in Cardiff. She first saw the company in 1981, and will see them again this week at the Wales Millennium Centre.



Jamison joined the dance company in 1968

"I'm absolutely beside myself with excitement," she says.

"I love the company. The quality of the dancers is extraordinary. It's a company that sweeps you up in to it and makes you want to join in."

It is this emotional connection with the audience that has kept the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company alive, and at the forefront of American culture.

The company was created more than 50 years ago and was revolutionary at the time for seeking to portray the African American experience through dance. It was born out of Alvin Ailey's frustration with the big dance companies of the day. Overwhelmingly white, they gave few opportunities to black dancers.

Jamison was one of the company's most important dancers. Her place was cemented in America's dance history when Ailey created a solo dance for her, titled Cry.

Like much of Ailey's work, Cry was about overcoming adversity in a colour divided country. It was dedicated to his mother, who moved around Texas in the 1930s looking for work as a cleaner or cotton picker.

When Ailey died suddenly in 1989, the flagship company that had become the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was passed to Jamison for safekeeping.

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

- Formed in New York in 1958

- In 1960, Alvin Ailey choreographs classic masterpiece, Revelations
- On October 30 in 1965, Judith Jamison dances with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for the first time
- 1971 - Alvin Ailey choreographs Cry for Judith Jamison as a birthday present to his mother. Cry becomes an instant hit
- Judith Jamison premieres her first ballet, Divining, for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1984
- Alvin Ailey receives The Kennedy Center Honor for lifetime contribution to American culture in 1988
- Honouring Ailey's wish, Judith Jamison becomes the artistic director in 1989, following his death.
- On September 4 2007, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is featured on the season opening of the Ellen DeGeneres Show
- The Theater celebrates its 50th anniversary
- Judith Jamison receives the BET Honors award in 2009
- 2010 - Robert Battle is announced as Jamison's successor
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Since then, she has steered the ship through rocky economic waters, and has stayed true to the company's original vision, whilst moving with the times.

When it started out, the company was made up of eight dancers - Ailey's friends and peers. Today, led by Jamison, it has gone on to perform in more than 70 countries. It employs more than 30 dancers, and has a large studio in New York with 12 state of the art dance studios. As well as touring and performing, it has an extensive education programme.

Now touring the UK, Jamison has created a show which mixes old and new, and features tributes to both founder Ailey and herself.

The show starts out with Suite Otis. As its name suggests, this homage to Otis Redding features timeless songs such as Satisfaction and Try a Little Tenderness.



The Theater's latest show features old and new pieces

The soundtrack continues with Nina Simone's Wild is the Wind which accompanies Robert Battle's solo piece In/Side. Soon to be Jamison's successor, Battle is known for his unrestrained style and physicality.

Dancing Spirit is a new work by Ronald Brown and is a tribute to Jamison's influence. The movement fuses moves from Cuba, Brazil and the United States.

The grand finale, titled Revelations, is as old as the company itself. It tells the African-American story, and has been seen by more people around the world than any other modern ballet.

Although Jamison is stepping down as artistic director when this season ends, her place in American culture is firmly set.

This September, First Lady Michelle Obama recognised Jamison's contribution by honouring her at the White House as part of a new series of dance events.

"I was thrilled, and the thing I loved was the atmosphere," says Jamison.

"When you go to the White House it now feels like a home. It was full of kids and students running around taking dance classes. I'm thrilled that the First Lady and President understand the importance of the arts."

It may be comforting to know that the Obamas support the arts, especially during these stormy economic times, but Jamison will soon be passing the Ailey baton on.

After two decades at the helm, she may be taking a back seat in the company but the lady's not for leaving. "I'm not retiring, I'm re-wiring," she says.

"It's all going to be a surprise, but one thing is you haven't seen the last of me. This company was given to me. I'll still be around."

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is currently on tour in the UK and will continue in Cardiff, Bradford, Edinburgh and Newcastle before moving on to Israel.