

Modern Classics

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For Judith Jamison's 20th anniversary with Alvin Ailey, she choreographed with her muse in mind: Clifton Brown

By [Susan Reiter](#)

Judith Jamison calls Clifton Brown “my muse,” and for her latest dance, *Among Us* (Private Spaces: Public Places), he is not only performing a pivotal solo role but also serving as her choreographic assistant. She developed her movement ideas with him before she began working with the full cast of 11. The piece, which has its premiere Dec. 4, is part of a festive Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater season (Dec. 2–Jan. 3 at City Center) that celebrates Jamison’s 20th anniversary as artistic director.

Brown, an Arizona native who joined the Ailey troupe 10 years ago, is an unassuming but stellar dancer: lanky, quietly intense and eloquently controlled. He is also remarkably adept in many styles—something that is a prerequisite for an Ailey dancer these days, given the repertory’s variety—and can shift from the classical technique required for the title role in Maurice Bejart’s *Firebird* to the daring, muscular explosiveness of Twyla Tharp’s *The Golden Section*.



Clifton Brown in Judith Jamison’s *Among Us* (Private Spaces: Public Places). Photo by Paul Kolnik

As the Ailey troupe geared up for its annual five-week season, he was busy rehearsing a wide variety of works, old and new. But he admitted that the particular demands Jamison has shaped for him in the new work posed novel challenges. For *Among Us* (Private Spaces: Public Places), which is set in an art gallery, she envisioned Brown as a jin, or genie—a spirit force that appears in various Eastern and African cultures. Jamison incorporated an unusual array of dance forms, and for Brown’s deft, intriguing central role, she drew particularly on Bharata Natyam, an intricate, ancient style from southern India.

“Dancing with the Ailey company, we do all

different kinds of dance, so I thought, ‘It’s dance, I can pick it up, no problem; I’ll just need a little while to process it,’” Brown said with a gentle laugh during a rehearsal break.

“But it’s so different from the way I’m used to moving. I had to work for so long to get all the little details—with the hands, and the head. I still have a ways to go.”

Brown learned the elements of Bharata Natyam from Sathi Pillai-Colucci, Jamison’s longtime executive assistant who is a classically trained Indian dancer. Jamison turned to her to help transmit the essential aspects of the style to the dancers. “The movement is so beautiful,” Brown said. “It seemed simple when she did it, but once I tried, it just didn’t come out at all. I just hope I do it justice and keep all the detail she showed.” In giving him choreography that drew on Bharata Natyam, Brown sensed that Jamison “was trying to make that exclusive to the Jin, set him apart from the others. He’s very otherworldly and omniscient. He’s able to shift things here and there. Others don’t necessarily see him. So he’s the only character that isn’t necessarily human.”

His character, as well as the entire dance, was inspired by paintings that Jamison has made in recent years. The setting is an art gallery opening, and 11 of her artworks will be displayed on its walls. Through a series of vignettes, fantasy and reality blend, as characters reveal their more private aspects within this public setting. An

original score by the innovative pianist-composer Eric Lewis provides widely contrasting sounds for each section of the dance, juxtaposing and blending influences in much the same way as Jamison's choreography. Brown, who started dancing at four, recalls that his introduction to the Ailey company was a videotape he checked out of the library in Phoenix, Arizona. "I had gone to a dance convention and some teacher had told me, 'You should go to the Ailey School.' I was like, what's that? So I decided to figure out what it was." The video—a series of vintage choreography by Ailey, including Revelations —opened up his eyes to unknown possibilities of dance. "Before that, I had seen MTV dancing, as opposed to dance being the art form on display. So I got really excited when I saw that."

He attended a summer session at the Ailey School and successfully auditioned for the unique Ailey/Fordham BFA program. After a year, "I decided I wanted to dance professionally, or to go to school and not dance. I was having one of those life decision moments," he said. He auditioned successfully for the company, and the decision was made.

Jamison took note of him from the start. A year after he joined Ailey, she created a featured role for him in Double Exposure. He has since assisted her in the creation of two other works for the company. He will be performing two different roles in the alternating casts of another Jamison work, Hymn, her very personal tribute to Alvin Ailey.

Jamison's achievement over the past two decades has been to sustain and enlarge Ailey's vision, taking the company to new heights. Her personal stamp on the company is evident in the dancers she selects—each boldly individual, none cut from a specific mold. "She wants everyone to bring themselves as dancers to the stage," Brown observed. "She's not trying to drill us and make us do everything the same way. She wants what people can do as individuals to shine on stage."