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Judith Jamison

Powered by tradition, she's propelling the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre into the future

'You ever play an old record that just made you feel good about everything?" Judith Jamison asked. "These times made me feel very good about the work I am doing.

"I'm still smiling," she added. Jamison, artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, was describing how she felt after completing a month-long schedule of performances held to celebrate her 20th year leading one of the world's premier dance troupes. And as is her practice, Jamison (she uses her father's pronunciation, Jam-essin, rather than the conventional Jay-missin) already was looking ahead.

Though she was supposed to be on a "so-called vacation," Jamison, 66, was in the midst of planning the group's annual Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts Gala in Washington — the kickoff of a 20-city, national tour that will end with performances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music June 10 through June 20.

Under Jamison's direction, the dance company has become a conglomerate with several touring companies, a dance school and a multimillion-dollar performance center/school — the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre/

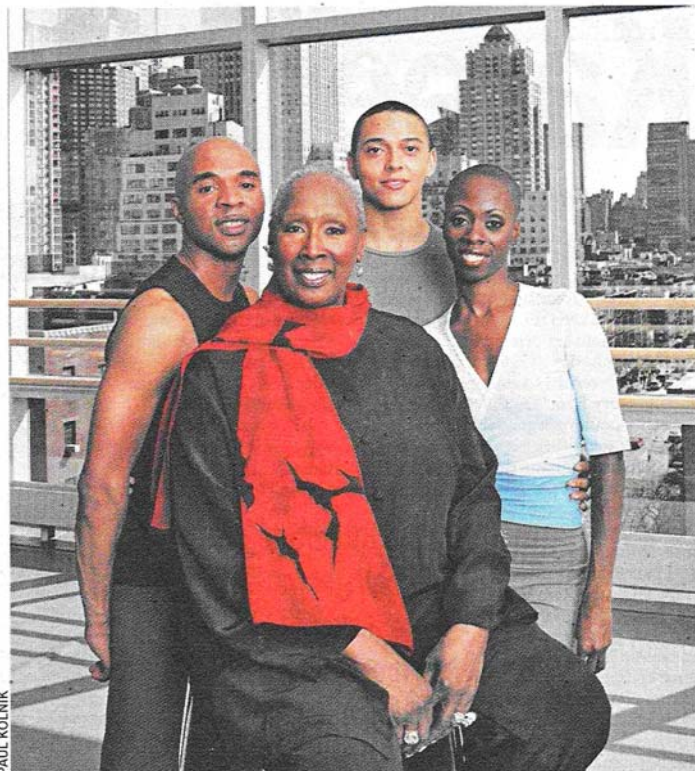
Joan Weil Center for Dance, on W. 55th St. and Ninth Ave. in Manhattan.

She joined the company as a dancer in 1965, and assumed command in 1989 at the request of founder Alvin Ailey, who died a year earlier. But he remains at the soul of the company, Jamison says:

"My hat is off, as always, to Alvin Ailey, who started it all in 1958," Jamison said. "When he started, no one was doing what he did."

In 2010, Jamison is clearly the company's heart, responsible for the group's economic stability after many lean years while also increasing its repertoire to more than 250 dances. Many are American classics, including "Cry," "Hymn," "Blues Suite" and "Revelations."

Born on May 10, 1943, in Philadelphia,



PAUL KOLNLIK

Judith Jamison (c.) with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre company members (l. to r.) Matthew Rushing, Clifton Brown and Dwana Adiaha Smallwood.

Jamison was 6 years old when her parents enrolled her in the Judimar School of Dance, where she studied ballet, tap and jazz dance.

She attended Fisk University for a year before returning to the Philadelphia Dance Academy, where choreographer Agnes De Mille discovered her in 1964 and invited her to join the American Ballet Theatre.

Jamison stayed in New York when the job ended, at one point surviving by running a log flume ride at the 1964 World's Fair in Queens.

She was making the rounds of auditions for dance companies when Ailey saw her rehearsal for another group and offered her a spot with his company.

She would stay with him from 1965 to 1980, becoming principal dancer and the muse for many of Ailey's pieces, including "Cry."

While with Ailey, Jamison also performed with some of the greatest dancers of the day, including Mikhail Baryshnikov and Alexander Godunov.

After leaving Ailey in 1980, Jamison starred in the Broadway show "Sophisticated Ladies" with tap dancer/actor Gregory Hines. The show also toured nationally.

In 1984, Jamison choreographed her first piece, "Divining," which the Ailey company performed the same year.

Jamison formed her own company, the Jamison Project, in 1988. The group was beginning gain fame when Ailey fell

ill with AIDS and asked Jamison to take over his company.

She went on to make history — winning awards too numerous to list here, including an Emmy Award for choreography, a Kennedy Center honor and a National Medal of Arts, the highest honor available to American artists.

Under her leadership, the Ailey troupe has toured 48 states and 71 countries on six continents, performing for more than 23 million people.

Time magazine included Jamison on its list of the 100 most influential people in the world. Still, she is more apt to talk about her dancers than herself; she's known many since they were children.

"I just admire the dancers of this generation, and the generation before this and the generation before that," she said. "Ailey in 1958 was doing a different dance than is done now."

"My dancers," she said, pausing to name a dozen or so, "are able to bring that world to a huge audience, and they bring it with the intelligence and beauty of great artists."

"I'm proud of their constant understanding of how important it is — in particular for the African-American community — that they hold the flag high. I see that they understand what it means to work in the community, to be responsible to the community you serve."

"They understand what it is to be at the top of your game," she said. "I see my influence in them in their keeping the flame as large as possible, but I also see their complete individualism coming out."

"It is wonderful, because in many ways the company is about the past, present and future."

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Clem Richardson



'My hat is off, as always, to Alvin Ailey, who started it all in 1958.'