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The Transition at Alvin Ailey

The Alvin Ailey organization has recently announced that Robert Battle would replace Judith Jamison as artistic director next year. Robert will have one year to work with Judith to prepare for this huge assignment. There was much to dissect in this surprising announcement. Mr. Battle is very young, he has run a very small dance company and will take over the largest modern dance organization in the world, he never danced with the Ailey company, etc.

I ran the Ailey organization from 1991-1993 as executive director and came to appreciate the tremendous strengths of Judith Jamison. She was relatively new as artistic director at that time but she was very clear on her artistic goals for the institution. She wanted to preserve the best of Alvin's choreography while bringing new dance makers to the organization. Of course, she had the benefit of years of counsel from Alvin Ailey himself; in fact, Judith always talks about "standing on Alvin's shoulders." She has been a remarkable steward for the organization and taking her place will be a formidable challenge.

For the past fifteen years, Judith has had a remarkable partner in Sharon Gersten Luckman as executive director. I hired Sharon to be my development director at Ailey. It was the best hire I ever made in my career. Sharon and Judith have created an astonishing juggernaut that has allowed the Ailey organization to thrive. The new fantastic building, the expansion of the Ailey school, the increased touring, the larger presence in New York City all have come from the remarkable partnership of Judith and Sharon. The way this transition has proceeded is just another in a long line of successes.

For me, in fact, the amazing aspect of this announcement was how smooth the selection process seemed from the outside.

The institution of Ailey has now had to replace artistic directors twice in the past 20 years. These transitions were handled with astonishing professionalism and focus. There was none of the drama that has accompanied such transitions at other organizations. The board, artistic leadership and administrative staff all seem united and genuinely happy.

This latest transition is perhaps the more remarkable. Twenty years ago, Alvin asked Judith to take over for him on his death bed. There was no question that a new leader had to be found and Judith was a natural heir to the position.

But this transition did not have to happen. Judith is still an amazing, potent woman. She could have continued to occupy this important position. It was her decision that it was time to step down. It was her decision to participate fully in this search process. It was her discipline and her deep love for the Ailey company that made the search process move gracefully over the past year.

I can't imagine a better exclamation point to her remarkable career than the way she has facilitated this beautiful transition. Her legacy will astonish and educate anyone who studies it for centuries to come.