

Cultural ambassador to the world

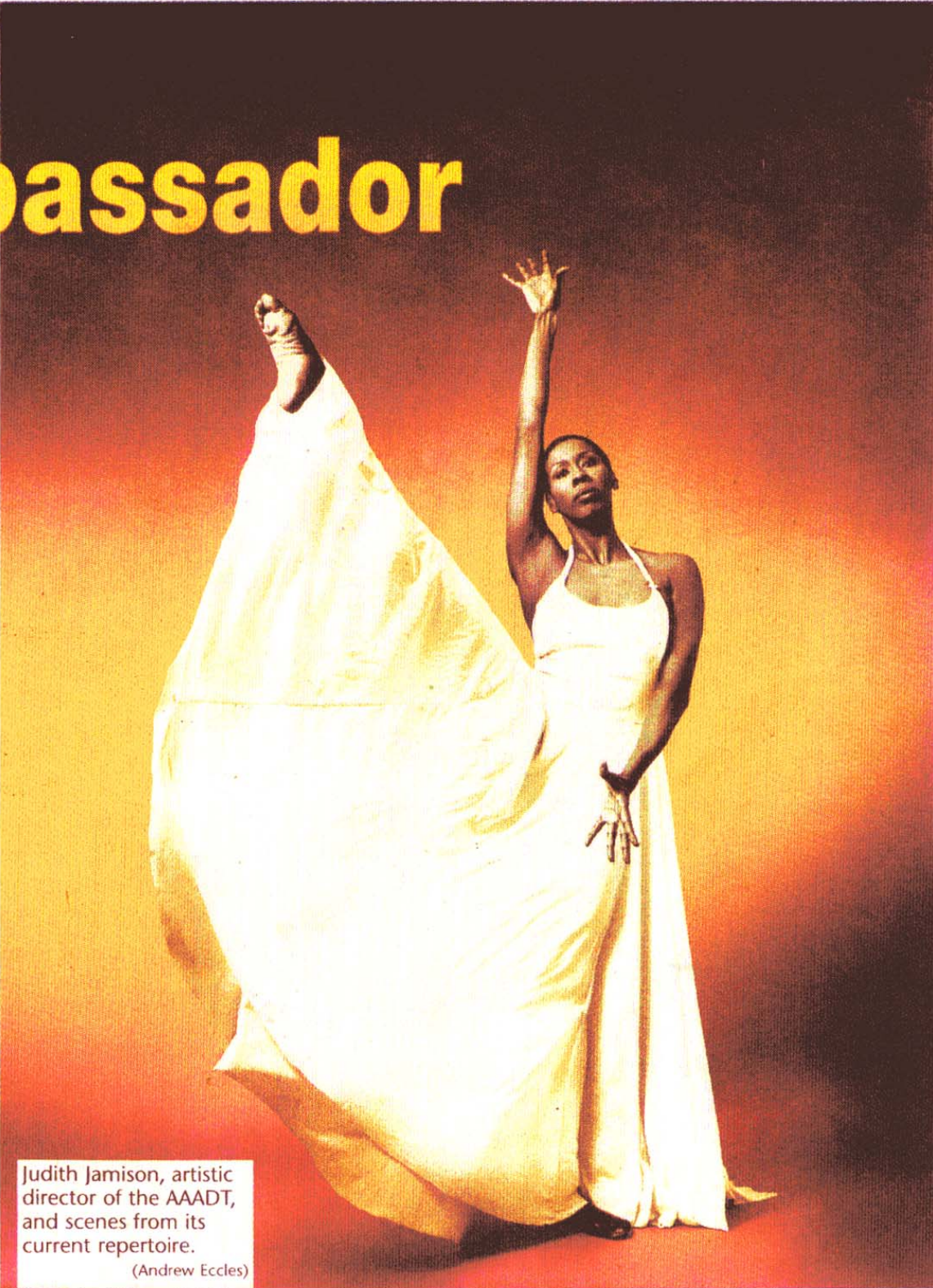
After a 10-year hiatus, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is on its way

• By ORI J. LENKINSKI

Operating out of its new state-of-the-art space on 59th Street and 9th Avenue in New York City, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is reaching highs that few dance companies can dream of. Now celebrating its 50th year of artistic excellence, AAADT is one of the most viewed and beloved dance companies in the world. Having recently been named an official cultural ambassador of the United States, AAADT continues to inspire audiences and touch hearts. Its next stop, after a hiatus of more than 10 years, is Israel.

In many ways, AAADT is "the little engine that could" of the dance world. What started as a small project in New York City in 1958 has become the most highly acclaimed American dance foundation of all time. Beginning in the 1960s, AAADT has been invited to perform all over the world. Its travel log includes six continents, 71 countries and an estimated 21 million viewers.

Alvin Ailey was born in Rogers, Texas, in 1931. He spent the better part of his formative years debating between the uncertain life of an artist and the more secure life of a teacher.



Judith Jamison, artistic director of the AAADT, and scenes from its current repertoire.

(Andrew Eccles)

When an opportunity arose to perform in a Broadway show in the mid-1950s, Ailey threw caution aside and took the risk. His decision created one of the most pivotal moments in dance history. A few years later, he premiered his new company to rave reviews at the still existing 92nd Street Y.

Over the past 50 years much has changed inside AAADT. After years of moving from location to location, it finally found a permanent home in 2004. Says artistic director Judith Jamison, "It took us a long time to get here. You go where you have to go. The first building was on the corner of Bloomingdales. When Alvin was teaching, he was teaching in a basement of a church."

The new building provides a comfortable home for AAADT, Ailey II, the second company, the Ailey School, considered to be one of the best professional training programs in America, and Ailey Camps. "I don't know if Alvin thought it would last this long," says Jamison.

AILEY WAS born in a time and place that was still rife with signs of segregation. African-American history was, for him, a family history. It was this background that he revisited and portrayed throughout his astonishing career as a choreographer. "Ailey essentially told the story of African-Americans from slavery to freedom," says Thomas Defrantz, author of *Dancing Revelations*. In

1988, after a prolonged illness, Ailey died. In keeping with his wishes, Jamison, Ailey's former star dancer, took over as artistic director.

She too is a force to be reckoned with: As a dancer she was nothing short of magical. Her foray into the limelight began with her inspired performance in the solo "Cry," which Ailey choreographed for her in 1971. In 1976, she took the stage alongside Mikhail Baryshnikov in the celebrated duet "Pas De Duke," choreographed by Ailey to music by Duke Ellington.

For the past 20 years Jamison has led AAADT to new heights while consistently honoring Ailey's life and work. "Ninety percent of the dancers in the company have never met the man," says Jamison. "All of these works are embraced and come alive because of these dancers. They get the same feeling of his love of dance, the dancers and people. The dances have a tendency to embrace you. They become part of you and your makeup as a person."

Since becoming artistic director, Jamison has choreographed several ballets including *Reminisce*, *Divining* and *Hymn*. When asked what the mission of the company is, she replied, "For me, it remains the artistic excellence of the dancers. That's the No. 1. Alvin cared about dancers, about people. He wanted that great combination of a great human being who had the talent of dance. They are really dancers who dance from the heart. Dancing about something other than looking beautiful."

JAMISON'S NEWEST ballet, *Love Stories*, will be performed here this fall. To create it, Jamison joined forces with choreographers Robert Battle and Rennie Harris. "I had this idea about past, present, future which is what we're about. I thought of Rennie to represent the present and Robert to represent the future and I did the past," she said.

Love Stories is not only a collaboration between different creators, it is a meeting of styles. Battle, founder of Battleworks, is a fierce and risky choreographer. One critic wrote, "Battle makes the audience sit up and take notice, marvel, even laugh. His work reaches over the stage and communicates with people."

Harris is a hip-hop legend. Based in Philadelphia, his company, Rennie Harris Puremovement, is devoted to providing audiences with a sincere view of the essence and spirit of hip-hop. "The whole idea of the ballet is to look at these different kinds of dances we are doing in one ballet. No matter what the society is doing, we will either reflect the society or, as artists, explore new territory."

Since the early years of AAADT, the company has invited the best international choreographers to create pieces for its exceptional dancers. "Firebird" by Maurice Bejart and "The Golden Section" by Twyla Tharp will be part of the two-part program at the Tel Aviv Performing Arts Center next month.

"The past, present and future... is what we're about," says Jamison. The programming choices for this visit deeply reflect that sentiment. "Reflections in D" and "Night Creature," two of Ailey's most celebrated creations, will give audiences a glimpse of the company's prolific repertory. Perhaps no dance piece has brought as many audiences to their feet as Ailey's tour de force "Revelations," choreographed in 1960, which will be performed in both programs. The masterpiece has been performed for almost 50 years, but it continues to astonish, change and grow. Matthew Rushing, a long-time company member, says, "If I continue to bring my life experience to the stage in 'Revelations,' then it will never grow old. I'm not the same person I was last year, so the ballet should feel different too."

This will be AAADT's fifth visit. "I was there after the Six Day War for the first time," says Jamison. "It was a real revelatory experience being there. The last time we were there was '96. That's a long time not to have gone to one of my favorite places to perform."

Whether this is your first time with AAADT, or your first in a long while, this opportunity to take in one of the world's true wonders should not be missed.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater
Tel Aviv Performing Arts Center
September 9 through 13
(03) 692-7777
www.israel-opera.org.il

