

20 Years at Alvin Ailey's Helm

by Sylviane Gold

November 23, 2009

When Judith Jamison was growing up in Philadelphia, her dream was to be a pilot. Ultimately, she found another way to fly, becoming a star with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. AAADT was then just beginning to blossom into the spectacularly successful enterprise - "Cultural Ambassador to the World," as the brochure says - that we know today. From 1965 until 1980, Jamison's marquee power had a good deal to do with this success. Imposingly tall, with a balletic line and a fluid torso, she was a riveting presence onstage; offstage, she was a muse for Ailey, who created some of his most memorable works specifically for her.



Judith Jamison

Now, 44 years after she joined the company, she is still a marquee attraction - these days, as the boss. And when AAADT arrives at City Center on December 2 to open its annual five-week engagement, it will be celebrating not just the electrifying dance legacy of Ailey, not just the awesomely gifted performers who carry on the tradition, but Jamison's 20 years as the handpicked successor to the company's founder.

Alvin Ailey was an American original. Devastatingly good-looking and just as charismatic, he combined the talents of a powerful dancer, an instinctive choreographer and a down-home country preacher. These helped him realize his vision of a dance company rooted in the black experience but not limited to it - a vision that has shaped several generations of stellar dancers and has thrilled audiences the world over. Before Ailey died, in 1989, he entrusted that vision to Jamison, who had by then left to guest with other companies, to star on Broadway, to form her own troupe. She put aside her personal dreams to ensure that his would survive.

"Alvin's legacy," she says. "It sounds so heavy. But it's actually a resonance of his life, and how he acted, and the way he carried himself." She ticks off her list describing his special aura: generosity, openness, humanity. "That resonance has to be maintained," she says. "It's not an accomplishment; it's an ongoing paradigm."

She was able to make the transition into her new role because, she says, Ailey had always engaged his dancers in a stealth leadership school. "He would let us all run rehearsal," she says. "When he would leave the room, somebody would take over. When he had a sore throat, or if he couldn't make it to an embassy party, or whatever, then we would talk." At one point, she recalls, when she was between apartments, she stayed with Ailey and slept on the sofa in his living room. "Alvin had a desk with papers all over it. I watched him do the business of running the company."

On her watch, the company didn't just survive. It thrived. When she joined, Ailey had ten dancers; today there are 30. The Ailey school, now a major player in dance education, offers degree programs



Judith Jamison in the original production of Revelations

in partnership with Fordham University. A fund-raising powerhouse, AAADT built itself a sparkling, state-of-the-art glass-and-steel home on West 55th Street in 2004. Choreographing herself, reviving works from the Ailey canon, and commissioning new ones from artists in and out of the company, Jamison has brought nearly 100 new dances into the repertoire. And most important, by her lights, she has managed to keep Ailey alive not just on the stage but in the day-to-day workings of the company.

In honor of her 20 years at the helm, the AAADT season, which runs through Jan. 3, includes a slew of special events. "A humdinger," she calls it: The world premiere of Ronald K. Brown's "Dancing Spirit," which borrows the title of Jamison's autobiography to pay her tribute; the world premiere of Jamison's newest choreography, based on some of her own drawings; "Best of 20 Years," a highlights evening made up of excerpts from works presented by AAADT under her leadership; a revival of "Hymn," her 1993 tribute to Ailey with a text compiled by Anna Deavere Smith; even a reduced-price performance sponsored by Target.



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's
Linda Celeste Sims and
Glenn Allen Sims in Revelations.

Andrew Eccles

In addition, of course, are the company's usual offerings - although no Ailey regular would call anything the company does "usual." There will be 28 performances of "Revelations," the ageless Ailey masterpiece set to a selection of spirituals. Company veteran Matthew Rushing has created a new work evoking the Harlem Renaissance to a score that includes tunes by Fats Waller, Eubie Blake and Nat King Cole. And "In/Side," a solo choreographed by Robert Battle to a Nina Simone recording, will have its company premiere.

Jamison says she doesn't think about how things might have gone if she hadn't returned to run AAADT. "I didn't plan this," she says. "But when you're in the forest, you don't go outside and say, 'Oh, yeah, it's a forest.' I'm in the forest. So the way my life has gone is exactly the way it's supposed to, and there ain't no one gonna change that." And yes, she is a kind of pilot, after all.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Dec. 2-Jan. 3.

New York City Center, 55th Street; 212-581-1212;

alvinailey.org or nycitycenter.org.

Sylviane Gold has written about the arts for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, Newsday and Dance Magazine. Her last piece for Promenade was on Morphoses/The Wheeldon Company.
