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Dance

Denise Jefferson, 65, Director of the Ailey School, Is Dead

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Denise Jefferson, an internationally known dance educator who as the longtime director of the Ailey School oversaw the training of generations of world-class performers, died on Saturday in Manhattan. She was 65 and a Manhattan resident.



Andrew Eccles

Denise Jefferson

The cause was ovarian cancer, according to the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, of which the Ailey School is the official training academy.

A member of the Ailey School faculty since 1974, Ms. Jefferson was its director from 1984 until her death.

With Judith Jamison, the company's artistic director, and Sylvia Waters, the artistic director of Ailey II, its junior ensemble, Ms. Jefferson was one of the triumvirate charged with continuing the work of Mr. Ailey, the dancer and choreographer who founded the company in 1958 and ran it until his death in 1989.

Under Ms. Jefferson's stewardship, the school, which Mr. Ailey established in 1969 with 125 pupils, grew to comprise a student body of more than 3,500 dancers from around the world and a faculty of 75. At the school, located with the company on West 55th Street, students can study a wide range of dance styles, from modern to jazz to classical ballet.

Many have gone on to careers with the Martha Graham Dance Company, the Mark Morris Dance Group, Ballet National de España and the Ailey company itself, among other troupes. (Nearly 90 percent of its current dancers were trained at the Ailey School, according to the company.)

Ms. Jefferson was also known for helping create an unusual degree program, run jointly by the Ailey School and Fordham University, in which dancers can earn a bachelor of fine arts at the university's Lincoln Center campus.

Begun by Ms. Jefferson and Edward J. Bristow, then a Fordham dean, the program, which admitted its first students in 1998, is believed to be the first association of its kind between a dance organization and a traditional liberal arts college. Ms. Jefferson directed the program until her death.

Denise Adele Jefferson was born on Nov. 1, 1944, in Chicago. At 8, she began ballet studies with Edna McRae, a noted teacher there. Though she became a skilled dancer, Ms. Jefferson did not plan on a career as a ballerina, for an elemental reason: as she told *Dance* magazine in 1999, “I had never seen anyone who wasn’t white in a ballet company.”

Before long, however, she discovered the world of modern dance. After receiving a bachelor’s degree in French from Wheaton College in Norton, Mass., and a master’s in French from New York University, Ms. Jefferson received a scholarship to the Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance. She began her professional career with the Pearl Lang Dance Company.

Ms. Jefferson’s marriage to John Roy Harper II ended in divorce. She is survived by her mother, Irma Jefferson; her sister, Margo Jefferson, a former book and theater critic for *The New York Times*; and a daughter, Francesca Harper, a dancer, choreographer and singer.

Though Ms. Jefferson confessed in interviews to having been somewhat shy onstage, she appeared to have had no trouble drawing out her students.

“The individual is unique and special, and we are here to celebrate that and help the dancers discover that,” she told *The Christian Science Monitor* in 1992. “We believe you can’t be a dancer if your spirit is restrained and cut off. You must touch that special thing inside.”