

NEW YORK

Shall We Dance?

Ten years after taking over the American Dance Theater, Judith Jamison -- Alvin Ailey's astonishing muse -- celebrates with a Kennedy Center Honor.

By [Joanne Kaufman](#) Published Dec 27, 1999

For Judith Jamison, sitting is an aerobic activity. The former star -- and muse -- of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater slices her hands through the air, wiggles them alongside her head to illustrate a point, and waves them across her body with tsunami-like force. Perched on a platform chair in her office, Jamison, who's been the company's artistic director since Ailey's death in 1989, suddenly scooches around to point out her artificial hip ("Titanium," she clarifies) and the place in her thighs where surgeons implanted steel some years back. "I'm bionic," she says, now leaning forward, a characteristically warm smile making the long journey east to west across her broad, expressive face.

Because the demands on her time and attention, not to mention her sound bites, are great -- and have gotten greater since she was named a recipient of this year's Kennedy Center Honors (the ceremony will be broadcast December 29 at 9 p.m. on Channel 2) -- Jamison tends to hop on board a conversation in the middle. "I'm the caretaker of spirit," she says by way of introduction. "I'm responsible for people who look like this" (she hauls out a cache of eight-by-ten glossies of company members) "and who can dance. That's Dwana Smallwood. And this is Bahiyah Sayyed. That's me directing. I just have gorgeous, *gorgeous* people. I ask for individuals, and I get them. I'm trying desperately with the dancers I have now for people to pay as much attention to them as they did to me."

Indeed, before Jamison, the names that were known in modern dance were the ones on the front door -- Martha Graham, Twyla Tharp, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor. There *were* no household names, no certified stars in the companies' ranks. But Jamison's astonishing performance and presence -- the embodiment of all our mothers -- in Ailey's *Cry*, her very handling of a white chiffon-decked umbrella in Ailey's signature gospel masterwork *Revelations*, changed all that.

"When Judy was onstage, no one else was onstage," an Ailey colleague observes simply.

Now in residence on the sidelines, Jamison, who is 56, is working another brand of alchemy. "I don't think there's any doubt that Judy is the principal reason that Ailey is one of the few modern-dance companies that's survived the death of its founder," says Ailey board president Henry McGee. "Ten years ago, the company was on the verge of bankruptcy. Now it has the largest budget of any modern-dance company in the country and is fiscally very sound. That turnaround has a lot to do with her. She's always exploring new artistic boundaries. What you have now is the Ailey legacy infused with her vision."

In fact, Jamison makes no distinction between her vision and Ailey's. "He spent fifteen years understanding who I was as a human being, and I understood who he was. Just because he left physically doesn't mean we're still not walking the same path. I *agreed* with what he was doing. I *agreed* that dancing is something that should be accessible to everyone and not an elitist field where you have to go with your gloves on and applaud very delicately. I *agreed* that you could be alive and well in an audience and if you felt like jumping up and having an expression you could do that. Before *arts-and-education* became a buzzword, I agreed with Alvin that we should be connected to the community. I'm just here to water the tree so it will grow and stay as strong as a sequoia."

"You want to hear the story?" she asks when the subject of the Kennedy Center Honors comes up (her co-honorees are Sean Connery, Stevie Wonder, Jason Robards, and Victor Borge). "The story is that I was on the road, and when I got back my assistant said to me, 'Didn't you look through your mail and see this letter that says you're getting the Kennedy Center honor?' And I said, 'No, you're wrong. It says *giving*. They want me to be a presenter, right?' "

Wrong.

"I didn't believe her. So she faxed this thing over to my apartment so I could see 'Receive the honor for unique and extremely valuable contribution to the cultural life of our nation,' " says Jamison, reading the citation. "At the time I was looking at a picture of Alvin, and the tears started. I didn't *try* to cry or anything" -- a wholly unnecessary addendum, since it's pretty clear pretty quickly that Jamison would as soon buy season tickets to *Riverdance* as manufacture an emotion. "The last time I was at the Kennedy Center, it was to see Alvin get the award. And here I am."

"Grab your butts tight. Boom. Faster! Flip now." Jamison, hair collected into innumerable skinny braids wrapped tightly around her head, is leading the full company -- 31 dancers -- through a rehearsal of *Hymn*, a dance of piercing angular movements she created in 1993 as a tribute to Ailey. "When you're reaching with your hands, you must evoke something, as if you were pulling energy out of the room."

"I think we're all more prepared when we work with her," says Renee Robinson, who's been with the company seventeen years. "We want to please her on so many levels. She's the choreographer and the artistic director, and she's Ms. Judith Jamison."

"Sometimes, we get kind of tickled," she adds. "We know we're there to follow instructions, but when Judy demonstrates something, we're watching and saying, 'Oh, my goodness.' She can see our faces change, not looking to copy her but just being in awe. She'll turn with a smile and say, 'I'm doing this so you can do it. Stop staring at me and get to work.' "

Jamison moves through four rows of dancers to correct an errant elbow, clarify a movement, adjust the pace.

"I see these dancers today. They have much more facility than my generation, much more. Their legs go higher. They can turn more. They can jump higher."

"Never do a piece for 31 dancers," she tells a visitor, inviting her to try a few steps. Only if Jamison joins in. "Thank God I don't dance anymore," she says. "There are some dancers who go on and on. I wasn't one of them. I certainly wanted to dance as long as I could, where I felt what I had to say to an audience was something extraordinary. But after that, it's someone else's turn. My expression can still be had through my dancers. There are places for them to go. My pleasure is in watching them get there."