

Alvin Ailey artistic director's 20 years on job celebrated in 5-week season

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Judith Jamison's new ballet is part of the season honoring her work.

Judith Jamison, the legendary dancer and choreographer, took up drawing a few years ago on the advice of a friend.

She was in the Adirondacks sketching with markers and paper in the middle of the night, when she drew a figure that sent shivers up her spine. "These eyes were staring at me," she said. "I had to turn the painting around."

Later she showed the figure to her assistant, who instantly recognized it as a Jinn, a genie that appears in South Asian and Islamic traditions. The uncanny Jinn and other drawings have become the inspiration for her newest ballet, "Among Us: (Private Spaces: Public Places)," premiering at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. It's part of a five-week season at City Center celebrating Jamison's 20th year as artistic director.

Characters from all walks of life come together at a museum party in her newest work, reflecting on the "joys and complications of human relationships." A blue genie soars across the stage integrating classical Indian dance steps, and performers thump to West African dance moves that Jamison said she picked up from friends. After seeing her drawings, jazz pianist Eric Lewis composed an original score for the ballet.

Creating a dance piece from artwork is a first for Jamison. But not out of character.

"These characters kept coming to me," she said. "Everything comes from God. You figure it out," said Jamison, who grew up in the deep faith of the black church.

If you go

What: Ailey Celebrating Jamison: "Best of 20 Years," a five-week season dedicated to its artistic director

Where: New York City Center, 131 W. 55th St., between Sixth and Seventh avenues.

When: Through Jan. 3 (more than 40 ballets by 20 choreographers)

How much: Tickets start at \$25.

More information: 212-581-1212; visit alvinailey.org

Throughout her two decades leading the iconic modern-dance company, Jamison has always been open to innovative ideas and collaborations.

Shortly before his death in 1989, Ailey appointed his star dancer and muse, Jamison, to carry on his vision of a dance company that honors the African-American experience.

Under her direction, the company moved in 2004 to a state-of-the-art glass headquarters — the Joan Weill Center for Dance — on 55th Street and Ninth Avenue in Manhattan. Jamison has elevated the Ailey name into an internationally recognized cultural icon, choreographing 10 ballets, commissioning and reviving more than 100 works, and touring around the world. An advocate for education, she created several community programs bringing dance lessons to inner-city children and spearheaded a joint bachelor's of fine arts program with Fordham University.

The honorary season includes a tribute ballet by Ronald K. Brown, "Dancing Spirit," the title of her 1993 autobiography. A "Best of 20 Years" program features highlights from the works of various choreographers she's brought to the repertory. Actor and playwright Anna Deavere Smith will make an appearance narrating "Hymn," Jamison's award-winning tribute to Ailey.

Jamison, who is tall, elegant and carries herself like an empress, recently explained where her poise came from. "I had great examples," she said. "My mom and grandma, they show you the way to go by example."

The same can be said for watching Ailey dancers perform.

"It's by example," she said. "They change the way you think about yourself and your relationship to humanity—that's what it's all about."

Jamison has announced she will step down as the company's artistic director in 2011. Her successor has not been named.

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