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'Anointed' preview: Alvin Ailey dancers pay tribute to outgoing artistic director

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Paul Kolnik Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater dancers in "Anointed," a new work about the late Ailey and the dance company leaders who have followed him.

For someone who doesn't dance anymore, Judith Jamison turns up onstage with surprising frequency.

That's because her colleagues at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater can't let her retire without acknowledging the key role she has played both as a flamboyant star of the 1960s and '70s and as the company's artistic director since 1989. Glamorous and imposing, she has been a pivotal figure.

Dancer Renee Robinson stood in as a proxy for Jamison in "Dancing Spirit," the tribute to the outgoing director that Ronald K. Brown choreographed last year. This season, when the Ailey company returns to New York City Center for its annual December engagement, Linda Celeste Sims will impersonate Jamison in "Anointed," a premiere choreographed by former Ailey dancer Christopher Huggins.

The director, 67, says Huggins' work is "loosely based" on real events, including the long-ago episode in which she fled in tears from a disastrous audition for a TV special, brushing past Alvin Ailey on the way down the staircase. Three days later, he would call to offer her a job in his company. More generally, "Anointed" describes the passing of leadership from the late founder to Jamison, and next to artistic director designate Robert Battle, who will succeed her in July. The dance's title suggests no ordinary transfer of power, but a dynastic lineage imbued with mysticism.

"We didn't get here by not taking what we do terribly seriously," Jamison says, apropos of Ailey's masterpiece "Revelations." "There's an important role this company has played in the history of dance in this country and in the world."

In addition to celebrating the 50th anniversary of "Revelations" with special events — at one performance 50 people, including surprise guests, will dance the opening section, "I Been 'Buked" — the upcoming season will feature a number of revivals and company premieres.

Four Ailey women will take turns wearing Jamison's mantle in a new production of "Cry," the signature solo Ailey created for her in 1971, in which he pays tribute to the endurance and pride of black women.

Jamison says Ailey's genius resided in his ability to understand people. "He was always interested in us as human beings first, and then as dancers," she says.

Battle's choreography will be represented this season by "The Hunt," a dance for six men that Jamison describes as "very primal and aggressive and in-your-face." Counterbalancing the testosterone of "the Hunt" will be a three-part solo by Camille A. Brown titled "The Evolution of a Secured Feminine."

Among other significant revivals, the Ailey company will present "Prodigal Prince," a spectacular pageant evoking the dreams of Haitian painter Hector Hippolyte, with scenery, costumes and choreography all by the inimitable Geoffrey Holder.

"He created a world that you step into, and there's no other world that looks that way," says Jamison, describing Holder's vision. "It's a wonderful array of color and light, and sound and mystery."

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Where: New York City Center, 55th Street between Sixth and Seventh avenues

When: Wednesday to Jan. 2. Tuesdays at 7 p.m., Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2 and 8 p.m., Thursdays and Fridays at 8 p.m., Sundays at 3 and 7:30 p.m. Performances begin at 7 p.m. on Wednesday and Dec. 31.

How much: \$25-\$150; call (212) 581-1212 or visit nycitycenter.org.