

Dancing Devotee: A candid talk with Judith Jamison

Judith Jamison, artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, will bring the company's suite of dances to Newark's NJPAC May 7-9.

By John Soltes / Editor in Chief

(May 3, 2010) — There's no denying that Judith Jamison, the legendary artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, is a woman with a pulsating spirit for the professional world she has called home for decades. Words like "love" and "exhilarating" are frequently used by the choreographer, and each time they feel genuine and true.

From the way she talks of the dancers who have learned and grown under her tutelage to the explanations she offers for her own artistic choices, Jamison comes off as an enthusiastic torch bearer, continuing to bring the flame of an American icon to audiences around the world.

And under Jamison's direction, which has lasted 20 years, the flame left by the untimely death of Ailey in 1989 at the age of 58 has spread into a creative, artistic brush-fire. This modern-dance company strives to honor and continue the rich African-American cultural experience.

Lineage seems to matter to Jamison. She is dedicated, as she put it, to the "past, present and future" of the Ailey company and how it carries on the spirit of its founder.

Perhaps that's why the past few days have been quite busy for this overseer of movement. On April 29, Jamison announced that she would help shepherd in Robert Battle as the new artistic director in 2011. She will remain in Emerita status, and, of course, her influence will be felt whether or not she's at the reins.

In describing her successor, Jamison remembered a dance piece she worked on a few years ago that now seems quite prophetic.

"In 2004, I did a piece called 'Love Stories,'" Jamison said during a phone interview. "I wanted to put two other choreographers with myself. And they were Rennie Harris and Robert Battle. And 'Love Stories' was about the past, present and future and the Robert Battle section was the future. So I thought it was rather ironic that that would be his position in 2004, and here we are today and he is the future."

Jamison said she is impressed by his daring talent. "He is courageous and he's brave to a fault," she said. "He goes into territory that is not necessarily comfortable, but it's exciting."

And Battle, in Jamison's eyes, has one of the best qualities of a choreographer or future artistic director. "He also cares for dancers," she said. "You have to love dancers. You have to love them as people and you have to love them as artists. And he does."

Though the headlines may be preoccupied with the company's future, Jamison is also quite excited for the present, which includes a seasonal stop at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark. The Alvin Ailey dancers will bring several pieces to the local area, May 7-9. Jamison will also be interviewed live before an audience at NJPAC on May 6.

For newcomers to the Ailey world, expect a suite of dances that both delights and challenges audience members.



Throughout all the steps and complex routines, the company stays focused on its founder and his singular, yet somehow all-encompassing vision.

“Alvin introduced the world to the fact that dance could be different,” Jamison said. “The dancers didn’t all have to look the same. They didn’t all have to have cookie-cutter bodies and you know they could all be their own individual self and still work as a group.”

The artistic director talks lovingly of Ailey, crediting his “genius in even thinking that we would celebrate the African-American cultural expressions and experiences as we still do.”

But beyond that, Jamison said the company is dedicated to finding the underlying humanity in all of its pieces and thus making connections for each audience member. “I think people understand the humanity of it, and they come to the theater and they feel differently when they leave the theater,” she said. “They have been changed — one way or another. They have been educated, uplifted and entertained. And they felt a part of it; they felt participatory as opposed to — yeah, they are up there and they are dancing and they are doing everything they can to twirl our socks. But it’s not just about that.”

Evidence of the company’s success can be found in the audiences that gather for each performance. “I’ve got generations of people coming to see Ailey and it’s been going on for years,” she said. “You see granddads and grandsons, and you see people from all strata of life in an Ailey audience. You see people that might want to go to a soccer game. They are sitting up there in an Ailey audience, cheering on the dancers.

“You see all different walks of life in our audience. When the lights go up, you kind of turn around and ... see not only the diversity in the audience, but how universally felt is the ardor for Alvin Ailey.”

Of the several pieces that will come to life on the stage at NJPAC, one of the most personal for Jamison is “Among Us” (featured at Saturday’s performance).

The dance was inspired by some of Jamison’s own paintings, which she created under the helpful guidance of Geoffrey Holder, a friend of Jamison’s and the husband of dancer Carmen De Lavallade, who actually introduced dance to Ailey as a teenager.

“(Holder) taught me the elements,” Jamison said. “He would say, ‘I’m not sure if we’re having a lesson, but come over here and let’s try this and let’s play today.’ Like kids. It was a wonderful experience. And still is. Geoffrey and Carmen are like my second parents, and I do spend time with them. And we do draw all the time, but it’s drawing on black paper instead of regular white paper. And so it’s all reversed, everything is reversed. And it’s a marvelous thing to bring out the color of black people on this black paper using reds, oranges and letting the black paper speak for itself.”

One particular painting that Jamison created while in the “middle of the woods in the Adirondacks” featured a jin, or genie. And from this painting grew “Among Us,” a dance piece that couples Jamison’s choreography with the jazz compositions of Eric Lewis. In the development process, she used Clifton Brown, who has been with the Alvin Ailey company for several years, as a “choreographic muse” to create the movement.

“I have never been this fascinated by the process,” Jamison said.

The result is a piece in which the dancers work their way through vignettes where they are unknowingly taken over by the power of a genie.

“And each time the genie is a part of them,” she said. “They don’t know that he is there manipulating them until the very, very end when they leave and he’s left on stage and he disappears in front of your very eyes. I love it.”

Another piece called “Uptown” will be featured Friday and Sunday. It involves the Harlem Renaissance and is choreographed by Matthew Rushing, an 18-year veteran of the company.

“You’re not going to believe what you’re going to learn from watching his ballet about the Harlem Renaissance,” Jamison said as a winning endorsement. “And he does it in a nutshell. He does it in 30 minutes. And we go everywhere from slavery, Paul Robeson, Marcus Garvey, ... to period dress, Josephine Baker, Florence Mills, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. DuBois ... he just covers territory in this like you wouldn’t believe. ... The dances are authentic. The costumes are authentic. It’s just wonderful. He filled all prerequisites: entertaining, uplifting and educating.”

Other pieces include “Dancing Spirit,” which is a tribute to Jamison’s work, and “Hymn,” an homage to Ailey using both explosive company dances and somber solos.

At all performances will be “Revelations,” Ailey’s masterpiece, which in many ways has become a rite of passage for those interested in modern dance. One doesn’t quite know the Alvin Ailey company without sitting through “Revelations” and experiencing all that the master choreographer wanted to convey.

For Jamison, in this time of remembering the past, enjoying the present and planning for the future, “Revelations” seems to be of particular importance and power. “Alvin Ailey not only was a genius as a choreographer, he understood what it was to be human,” she said. “I mean he takes you through the entire sense of anything you can feel as a human being, from triumph to defeat to victory to failure and everything else in between. And he does that through a suite of dances that touches all of our heartstrings, no matter what color you are, no matter what country you’re from.

“It is understood all over the world. Because it is about the human spirit, even though we wear that out a million times ... But unfortunately and fortunately that’s what it’s about — the human spirit and its strength and its constant sense of knowing that it can rebound.”

The steps may have remained the same throughout the years, but the personal connections change according to each wide-eyed audience member who takes in “Revelations.”

“Each generation imbues it with its own life,” Jamison said. “And that’s the beauty of all of this. It’s that the dance lives because of the people that are doing it and the dance is strong because of the genius that created it.”