

# the ROOT

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## The Root Interview: Judith Jamison on Leaving Alvin Ailey

**After 21 years with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, renowned director Judith Jamison is saying farewell. She spoke to The Root about some of her greatest moments, challenges and accomplishments.**

By: Valerie Gladstone

Judith Jamison has an awful lot of which to be proud. Under her leadership, begun in 1989 after the death of choreographer Alvin Ailey, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has become one of the most popular and distinguished dance companies in the world. It has performed for more than 23 million people in 48 states and in 71 countries on six continents, including two historic residencies in South Africa. In 2003 it opened the \$ 50 million Joan Weill Center for Dance, the nation's largest building dedicated to dance. She has been awarded the National Medal of Honor, named to Time magazine's 2009 list of the world's 100 most influential people and received the 2010 Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's prestigious Phoenix Award, among many other honors.



Judith Jamison (Andrew Eccles)

In July she steps down as artistic director, handing the reins to choreographer Robert Battle, whom she selected as her successor. But she will not disappear quietly. On Jan. 2 the company held a joyous farewell program for her, with more than 10 works performed by current and past members. And in the next months, she will accompany the troupe on a 24-city tour, starting with a stint at the Kennedy Center from Feb. 1 to 6, to introduce Battle to audiences around the country. The Root caught up with Jamison on New Year's Day, a day before the farewell program, as she recuperated from a cold.

The Root: What have been your greatest moments as director?

Judith Jamison: Watching my dancers grow. I felt it was my whole purpose to help them develop as artists. It thrilled me to see them change and become incredible performers before my very eyes. It fills my heart to see them transformed onstage. They work so long and hard to achieve that. It's a very intimate experience to witness, like watching your child grow up.

TR: What did it feel like to take on this responsibility after Alvin passed?

JJ: There wasn't any time to think, really. There was so much to do. I just put my head down and went.

TR: What helped you through?

JJ: Although I wasn't aware of it then, I think my training as a dancer. Somehow it was innate in me. Running the company didn't seem foreign. Part of that again had to do with people around me, the staff and dancers. And some of it had to do with Alvin. He was so grounded — things flowed naturally from him. We flowed from that. And then, of course, my faith.

TR: What do you consider your greatest accomplishments?

JJ: Getting our building up. The Ailey camps for inner cities all over the country, which I want to proliferate. The B.F.A. program with Fordham University, which allows Ailey students to get their degrees from Fordham. But I have to say they

were not my accomplishments alone — they wouldn't have been possible without my incredible staff. They often had the ideas and just ran them by me for approval.

TR: In relation to the dancers, what are you proud of?

JJ: Bringing in choreographers to challenge them, choreographers like Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Ronald K. Brown, Mauro Bigonzetti, Rennie Harris, Maurice Béjart, John Butler and, of course, Robert Battle. By working with such a diverse group of artists, they've learned all different kinds of styles, and became more flexible as a result. They can literally do anything.

TR: What has been most challenging about leading the company?

JJ: To keep pace with the growth of the organization. It was small when I took over. It's blossomed into a huge artistic endeavor.

TR: What do you plan to do after you step down?

JJ: I'll have a desk at the company for at least a year and check into the classes and rehearsals, coach and keep up with things. One way or another, I'll continue to educate and entertain — that's my mantra.

TR: Are you excited about going on tour?

JJ: I love being with the dancers in different theaters, hearing the audiences' reactions, catching up with old friends. And it's wonderful to see everything come together, the crew, the wardrobe, all of it creating one beautiful package. But the logistics — the madness of preparation, the airports, the buses, staying in hotels — not at all. I wish I could get there by osmosis. That they could beam me into cities so I didn't have to do the traveling. Remember, I started on the road as a dancer in 1964. It's been a long time.

*Valerie Gladstone, who writes about the arts for many publications, including the New York Times, recently co-authored a children's book with Jose Ivey, A Young Dancer: The Life of an Ailey Student.*