

THE ROOT

On the Red Carpet at the Alvin Ailey Gala

Michelle Obama and Iman co-chair the star-studded affair to kick off Ailey's New York season.

By: Leah Faye Cooper
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Alvin Ailey Dance: New York Gala a Star-Studded Affair. Getty Images

A stylish set of dance enthusiasts gathered at Manhattan's New York City Center on Wednesday to kick off Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's five-week New York season. The gala, attended by honorary co-chair model Iman (co-chair first lady Michelle Obama was unable to attend), marked a major turn for the company, ushering in Robert Battle's inaugural season as artistic director. Capped with a party at the New York Hilton, the event honored JPMorgan Chase Foundation President Kimberly B. Davis for the foundation's continued support of Ailey's educational and community programs.

Davis, who said she was both shocked and honored to learn that she was being recognized, was among the first of many luminaries to hit the red carpet, noting that her admiration for the renowned dance troupe encompasses more than just an appreciation for dance.

"I love Alvin Ailey not because of the artistic work they do but because of the incredible work they do in communities," she said, "particularly with young women of color. That's the stuff that turns me on."

Tapped as the evening's musical guest, John Legend revealed that the song he was performing, Stevie Wonder's "If It's Magic," was a number he knew long before becoming a Grammy Award-winning artist. "I played this song for a dancer when I was in college 12 years ago," he said, "so it's come full circle."

Other luminaries in attendance included Cicely Tyson, Debra Lee, Katie Couric, André Leon Talley and National Urban League President Marc Morial, sporting a fuchsia tie to match wife Michelle Miller's floor-length gown. Doubling as red-carpet correspondent and VIP guest, journalist Jacquie Reid began the night with a prediction. "I swear when they do 'Revelations,' I'm going to cry," said Reid, who brought her mother as her date. "I do every time I see it because I've been seeing it since I was a kid."

Pauletta Washington, wife of actor Denzel, also shared fond memories of the company, recalling the first time she saw them as a student at Juilliard. "I saw Judith Jamison and my whole life changed," Washington said of the iconic dancer, now artistic director emerita. "I saw how she expressed everything you could possibly feel through her body." Washington added that she couldn't be more pleased with Battle's appointment to artistic director, noting that his passion for life and dance will help educate younger generations.

Traffic kept Iman from escaping the fashionably late cliché, with the annual Christmas-tree lighting at Rockefeller Center and President Obama's trip to the city intensifying gridlock. Still, after joking that if she weren't in a Zac Posen gown, she would have walked, the model took a moment to express her gratitude for being included in the festivities. "Every year I attend, and I couldn't be more thrilled to be asked to co-chair this evening," she said before jetting inside. Battle's remarks were also brief -- a simple yet enthusiastic, "I feel good! I feel great! I have to work!" shortly before showtime.

Though Jamison successfully led the company for more than 20 years, she affirmed that Battle is the right person to take the helm. "People keep saying, 'How are you going to fill her shoes?' and he always says this: 'I wear a size 13!'" said Jamison. "I think that's the perfect answer. He has his own shoes to fill."

***Editor's note:** A previous version of this story incorrectly stated that first Lady Michelle Obama attended the gala. She did not attend.*