

DANCE

Barefoot at the White House

BY ROBERT GRESKOVIC

Washington
Though it was the day after Labor Day, “The White House Dance Series: A Tribute to Judith Jamison” began with a summer-camp air. Youngsters from nine arts programs around the country entered the crystal chandelier-hung East Room, often known for its grand state occasions, wearing a variety of T-shirts, workout clothes and tights. Some wore sneakers, some ballet slippers or socks, and many were barefoot as they took over the parquet floor in an improvisational array of stretches and splits, working their supple limbs. Dance bags and backpacks completed the dance-camp picture.

The two-part program was set in motion by confident directions and informative remarks from Damian Woetzel, a former New York City Ballet principal dancer who now serves as a member of the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities. Part one, lasting about 90 minutes, had Mr. Woetzel overseeing individual exercises led by people connected to the professional groups participating in the event’s second part, an hour-long performance.

It was hard to miss Ms. Jamison, dressed in summery whites topped by a vivid, cerise shirt, as she glided through the earlier, workshop portion. As the departing artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and former stellar Ailey dancer, she was the event’s special focus.

Under Ms. Jamison’s direction since 1989, when Ailey died, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater grew larger. Its educational outreach now includes various Ailey Camps, summer programs around the country for young people interested in dance. Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, a former Ailey dancer and now a leader of the company’s educational efforts, was in charge of the workshop’s Ailey component—the only portion of the workshop that journalists were invited to observe.

This took shape as a working session for the young attendees, who hailed from their schools in New York, Delaware, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Colorado, New Mexico, Michigan and Washington, D.C. Keeping to the focus on Ailey and Ms. Jamison, who arguably was the modern-dance choreographer’s most important muse, Ms. Thomas-Schmitt gave her obedient charges about as coherent an overview of a work as could reasonably be expected in such a short time. Calling her efforts a “crash course in ‘Revelations,’” she presented exercises based on Ailey’s broadly popular 1960 suite of the same name, danced to spirituals.

Throughout, the budding dancers proved engaged and game for all they were asked to do, no matter how quickly. My eye fell periodically on a barefoot boy in tights and a T-shirt who picked up the instructions with ease and eagerness, his body displaying a remarkable sense of aplomb and stability. When I asked his name, he shyly replied only “Benjamin” and noted that he wasn’t actually



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater’s Judith Jamison is celebrated by First Lady Michelle Obama at the White House.

studying dance yet but had come here for the new experience.

Part two was a more formal affair, with seating before the low, temporary stage for all the young people who participated in the workshop—thoughtfully seated first and up front—as well as for invited adult guests from the arts community. Six professional groups—Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the Paul Taylor Dance Company, “Billy Elliot, the Musical,” The Washington Ballet, “Super Cr3w” and New York City Ballet—were on the program.

First Lady Michelle Obama, looking elegant in a soft, white sleeveless shirtwaist dress accented with black, referred to the workshop as she introduced the performance: “We could hear you a little bit upstairs,” she said, before taking her seat next to her two daughters and her mother. “Did you all have fun this afternoon?”

“Yes,” was the hearty response.

“Did you work up a good sweat?”

“Yes!”

What followed was a neatly balanced sampler of dancing. Though the stage setup remained rather makeshift-looking, the simple, uncredited lighting worked wonders for the individual presentations. The more formal, portable East Room stage, a gift from ballet patron Rebekah Harkness that dates from 1965 and is sometimes seen in telecasts from the White House, was not used this time. Perhaps the arrangement that was employed instead took up less space and allowed for more seating, but many in the audience had to crane their necks or stand to gain a fuller view of the performances.

To wrap up, the First Lady hailed Ms. Jamison, her career and her company’s dancers by saying to her cheering audience: “See what you can be and do? If you have done it here in the White House, you can do it anywhere.” Then she added: “And they didn’t even break the chandelier.”

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