

## Alvin Ailey Dancers Honor Judith Jamison, Their Queen for 20 years

By [Deborah Jowitt](#) Friday, December 11th 2009 at 3:23pm



Harlem Renaissance redux: Yusha-Marie Sorzano and Linda Celeste Sims in Matthew Rushing's "Uptown." Photo by Paul Kolnik

### Details:

**Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater**

City Center

December 2 through January 3

Every time I see [Alvin Ailey](#)'s beloved *Revelations*, and the music for "Wade in the Water" begins, I remember [Judith Jamison](#) performing that soul-lifting sequence. This isn't fair to whatever current company member is doing it, I know, but I can't help it. Jamison wasn't part of the original cast of the 1960 masterwork, but she emblazoned her image onto the role. When she rushed onto the stage, her long white dress and the fabric over her white umbrella blowing with the force of her passage, your heart lifted. Once the singing began, her power, musicality, and radiance enriched Ailey's simple, fluid, treading steps; the way she reached deep to scoop up handfuls of invisible water could have cleansed the world.

Who could have foreseen back in the 1970s or 1980s that this gorgeous woman would build Ailey's already successful repertory company into a widely traveled institution whose handsome building contains a thriving school, as well as a theater that's available to performing groups around town? What other modern dance company can fill City Center on a Wednesday night? In 2008, AAADC began a year of celebrations in honor of its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Its current City Center season rightly celebrates Jamison's 20 years as artistic director by commissioning four world premieres (by [Ronald K. Brown](#), [Robert Battle](#), Jamison herself, and [Matthew Rushing](#)), along with presenting a slew of revivals, special events, and six performances that include a "Best of 20 Years" sampler.

Rushing, one of the company's most profound dancers, is relatively new to choreography; in 2005, he collaborated with two AAADC colleagues, Hope Boykin and Abdur-[Rahim Jackson](#), to create *Acceptance in Surrender*. It's a mark of Jamison's combined savviness and daring that she gave him the go-ahead to choreograph a work as ambitious as his new *Uptown*. Rushing repaid her trust by researching not only the social life and dances that figured in the Harlem Renaissance before he fleshed out his idea, but some of its thinkers, writers, and painters. *Uptown* is entertaining and smartly conceived, with only a few glitches. Admirably, Rushing refrains from exploiting the dancers' conventional virtuosity in order to convey the looser, dug-in, rough-edged dances of the 1920s and 1930s, such as the Big Apple, the Shim-Sham, and the Lindy.

The curtain opens on a spotlight Victrola, its golden horn sending out the glorious bass voice of [Paul Robeson](#) singing “No More Auction Block for Me,” while a slide show refers to slavery, the Civil War, the Harlem scene, and African American notables of the period. Rushing was wise to provide a host-narrator, “Victor,” to lead us through *Uptown*’s eight scenes (text by Rushing and [Gregor L. Gibson](#)) and to cast the terrific dancer [Amos J. Machanic Jr.](#) in the role. Whether wearing tails or a white suit like [Cab Calloway](#), Machanic cajoles us into Harlem’s high life like a born orator—sly with his body language and happy to join the dance at times.

The opening, “Welcome to Harlem,” set to original music by [Ted Rosenthal](#), unfurls as a brightly organized street scene of strutting men, rowdy kids, a cop, and bunches of a-bit-too-stereotypical sassy, gossiping women in their Sunday best (costumes partly assembled by Rushing with design input from [Jon Taylor](#) and [Dante Baylor](#)). Next, Machanic conducts us to a rent party that’s choreographed to convey an engaging semblance of spontaneity and easy-going fun. Stuffed into one corner of the stage, the performers chat and flirt, while [Khilea Douglass](#) takes on one guy after another for some athletic Lindy moves to the Beale Street Band’s recording of [Fats Waller](#)’s “The Joint Is Jumpin’.”

One of the most crackling sequences is one in which five sterling Ailey men ([Marcus Jarrell Willis](#), [Antonio Douthit](#), [Clifton Brown](#), [Kirven James Boyd](#), and [Jackson](#)) begin posed like the figures in the projected slide of a painting by [Archibald J. Motley Jr.](#) (1891-1981) and explode from there into some snappy, tautly organized moves—with one of them wielding a real guitar in synch with “Hit That Jive Jack.”

The weakest element of *Uptown* is Rushing’s take on the Savoy Ballroom in “Divas, Apples, and Jazz.” Not that it isn’t fun to watch the outrageously costumed [Linda Celeste Sims](#), [Rosalyn Deshauteurs](#) (!), and [Tina Monica Williams](#) unite to vamp us and dance alone to depict, respectively, [Florence Mills](#), [Josephine Baker](#), and [Ethel Waters](#). It’s just that they’re isolated in their red-curtain-draped, colorfully lit world (décor and lighting by [Al Crawford](#)). We could be anywhere. No socialites cheer for them, no experts take over the dance floor to compete. Maybe the other dancers are changing into the uniform beige-and-white outfits that make them look like members of a teenage club when they circle around in the lively Big Apple.

Rushing also inserts a small, happy-ending backstage drama. In “Shuffle Along,” Sims auditions for a show by lip-synching snazzily to a 1920s recording of [Eubie Blake](#) and [Noble Sissle](#)’s “I’m Just Wild About Harry.” The director (Machanic) is instantly wild about her. The costume designer ([Boykin](#)) bustles around, and—presto!—the talented girl’s blue overcoat is gone, and she’s a gold-clad star, backed by an equally gleaming, leggy chorus.

Between the musical scenes, Rushing interpolates more intimate and thoughtful solos, sensitively keyed to texts of the era. [Vernard J. Gilmore](#) dances while the recorded voice of [W.E.B. DuBois](#) remembers the founding of the [NAACP](#). [Ruby Dee](#) (also recorded) reads a passage from [Zora Neale Hurston](#)’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as [Briana Reed](#) gestures appropriately. [Clifton Brown](#) eloquently responds to [Carl Hancock Rux](#)’s reading of [Langston Hughes](#)’s poem “The Weary Blues.”

The premiere of *Uptown* followed a revival of [Ulysses Dove](#)’s *Episodes*, in which the Ailey dancers get to show their chops and then some. Love it or loathe it, this 1987 work is all of a piece, never deviating from its integral form: brief encounters by glamorous, powerful, angry men and woman along pathways of light. [Sims](#), [Deshauteurs](#), [Reed](#), [Constance Stamatiou](#), [Brown](#), [Boyd](#), [Machanic](#), [Gilmore](#), and [Guillermo Asca](#) perform it with deadly brilliance. Predatory, hostile, as tense as cats in heat, they respond over and over to [Robert Ruggieri](#)’s terrific, cosmically percussive score by sudden thrusts and strikes that freeze for a second, then melt sensuously, after which they stride on. It takes two seconds or less for a woman to hurl herself, spinning, into the air and be grabbed by a man. *Uptown* gives these superb dancers back to us as more nuanced human beings.

And [Judy](#)—[Miss Jamison](#)—thanks for everything.