

WWD, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24, 2010

## Dancing Queen



Judith Jamison



OVER THE LAST 45 YEARS, JUDITH JAMISON HAS BEEN INSTRUMENTAL IN THE SUCCESS of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater — first as a dancer with Ailey from 1965 to 1980, and, for the last 20 years, as the company's artistic director.

Next year Jamison retires from AAADT, but her legacy of introducing the art form to new generations and educating students will remain. The organization now encompasses The Ailey School for aspiring professionals; an Alvin Ailey B.F.A. program at Fordham University; The Ailey Extension, which offers classes to 35,000 members of the general public, and Ailey Arts in Education & Community programs, which reach out to inner-city children.

For her efforts, Jamison, 66, was honored with the 2010 Montblanc de la Culture Arts Patronage Award during a ceremony held at the Joan Weill Center for Dance on Monday evening. "Judith Jamison has been an icon to me since my college days. I used to come down from [Brown University] and watch her dance 'Revelations' with a big parasol," remembered André Leon Talley, one of several high-profile guests, including pianist Lang Lang and Montblanc North America chief executive officer Jan-Patrick Schmitz. "She took the mantle of Mr. Ailey on his death bed and promised she would do her best — and she went beyond."

Prior to the celebration, Jamison sat down with WWD.

— David Lipke

**WWD:** What does it mean to you to be celebrating 20 years at Alvin Ailey?

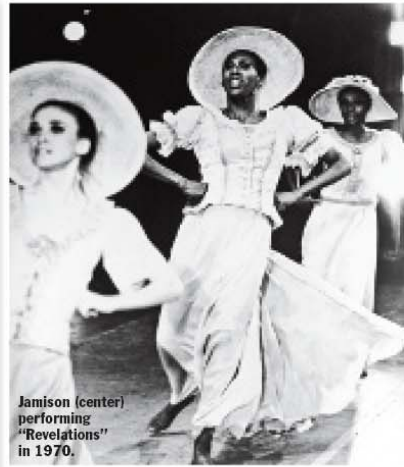
**Judith Jamison:** Well, there's a little pain over here. [Points to her back and laughs.] I've been able to sustain a vision from a man who planted a seed 51 years ago. And to me, that's an honor. But I didn't do this by myself. I've got 30 of the most extraordinary dancers, who understand the original idea of the company, which was to celebrate the African-American cultural expression and experience, as well as the modern-dance tradition of our country.

**WWD:** What are your most vivid memories from your career?

**J.J.:** Going to Africa for the first time. Alvin took us there in 1966 for the first World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar [Senegal]. That was my first step onto African soil. I'll never forget that as long as I live.



Jamison with Mikhail Baryshnikov in 1976.



Jamison (center) performing "Revelations" in 1970.

**WWD:** How important is the focus on the African-American experience for the company today?

**J.J.:** Well, we do works by [a diverse range of choreographers such as] Hans van Manen and Talley Beatty and Lar Lubovitch and Garth Fagan. There's an immense world that we cover with both our African-American experience and our modern-dance tradition. Alvin used to say: "I don't care if you're polka dot — if you can dance, you're welcome."

**WWD:** Is the troupe now multicultural or still mostly African-American?

**J.J.:** I don't count that way. I'm counting on seeing dancers who can tear the house down tomorrow. Of course we want to see images that young African-American kids, or people of color, can look at and see themselves reflected in. But the counting of heads, you know, I don't do that. Masazumi Chaya [Ailey's Japan-born associate artistic director] would be in a world of trouble if Alvin had counted heads like that, and he's been here since 1972.

**WWD:** What role do fashion and costume play in dance?

**J.J.:** Oh deep, deep. If I could use more of it, I would. I think fashion, when it works for the dance, is fine. But when it works for just the fashion itself and the dancer can't move, then what's the point? But I think we're all on the same creative curve. We've all trying to find new ways of doing things.

**WWD:** Jackie Kennedy Onassis edited your 1993 autobiography, "Dancing Spirit." What was it like working with her?

**J.J.:** She was just the most divine person — quietly genteel and a true lady. She'd watch some classes every now and then, and come to some performances unannounced. As an editor, she let me do what I had to do. I didn't want to write some cheap exposé with gossip. I wanted to write about my benign dictatorship.

**WWD:** What's left that you still want to do?

**J.J.:** Just continue to fly and help young people do what they must do, which is keep growing creatively and educationally. To me, what we are responsible for is to remind you that there is a little bulb inside of you that you need to make shine.

JAMISON PORTRAIT BY ANDREW ECCLES; BARYSHNIKOV BY GETTMAN/CORBIS; 'REVELATIONS' BY HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES