

Alvin Ailey dancers reflect Jamison's spirit

By Brenda Kirkpatrick
Sentinel-Voice

On opening night last Friday, the air was electric with anticipation in the Artemus-Ham Hall at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas campus. The world famous Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre made its debut appearance, featuring its artistic director, the grand dame of dance, Judith Jamison.

In a special interview with the Sentinel-Voice last week, Jamison talked about her history, her influences and her direction for one of America's most famous dance troupes.

Jamison's dance studies began in Philadelphia with Marion Cuyjet, her mentor. When she was growing up though, she had no dreams of being a professional dancer.

"I wanted to have a lot of fun. I studied the piano and the violin for four years and it wasn't until I was 21 or 22, that I considered dance as a career."

As with many tremendously successful people, Judith had adults around her as she grew up who helped reinforce her ability to tackle any task or goal before her.

"My entire family, the minister, the church with its spirit and pageantry and the recitals I danced as a child meant that every facet of my life was motivational," she said.

Because of America's racist society, networking became important for blacks interested in pursuing excellence in the arts. "Katherine Duvery successful dancer and teacher and as my mentor, was able to assist me

in those days," Jamison said. "Also, Marion Cuyjet, another of my mentors whom I mentioned earlier, looked white. Because of her appearance, she could get in doors that others couldn't and she was a tremendous help to me."

After high school, Jamison attended Fisk University as a psychology major, but later transferred to the Philadelphia Dance Academy (now the University of the Arts) where she is currently a visiting distinguished professor. Discovered by Agnes de Mille, she made her New York debut in deMille's "The Four Marys" with the American Ballet Theatre.

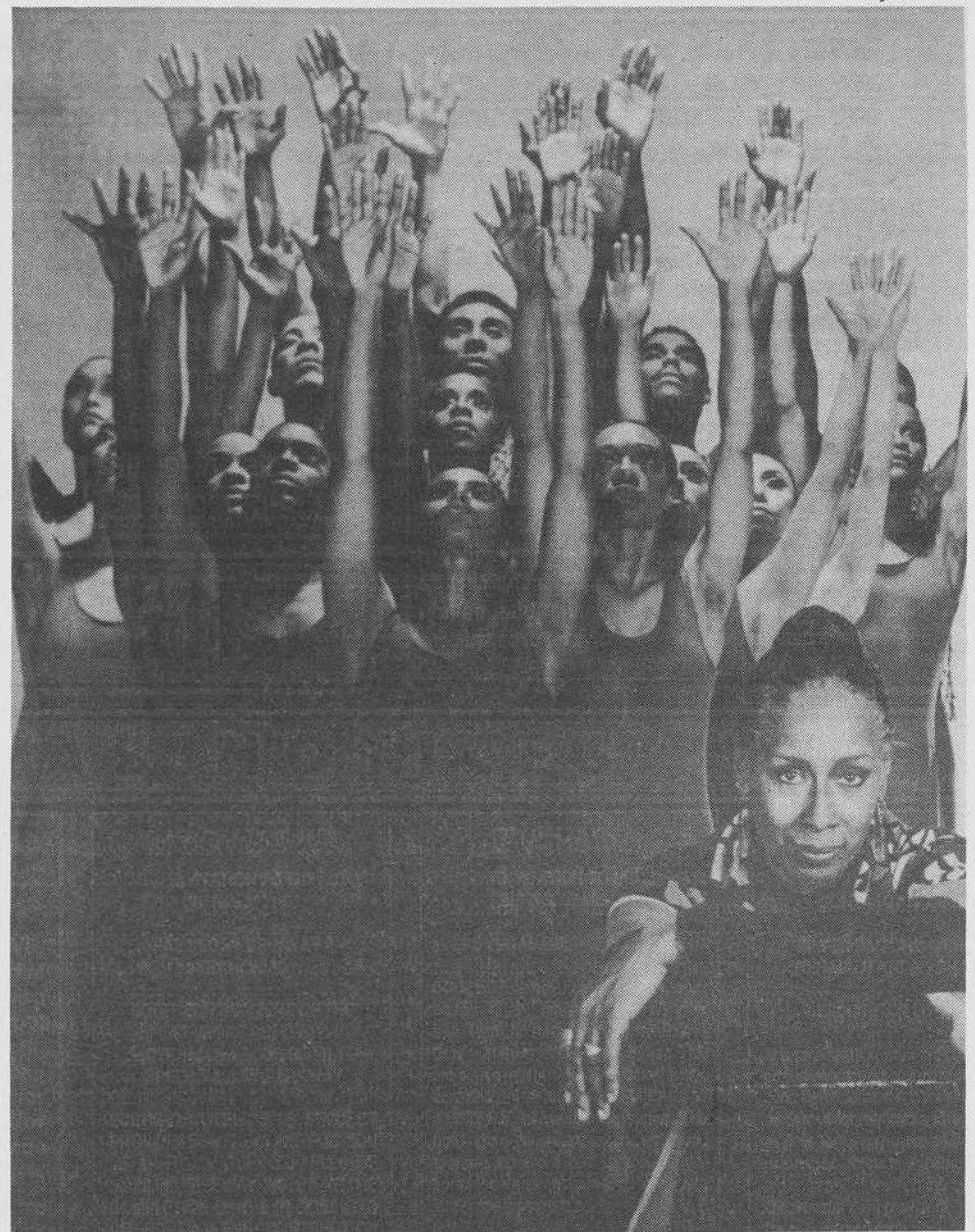
Ailey still casts a strong shadow of influence on the group

Jamison became a member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre in 1965 and toured the United States, Europe, Asia, South America and Africa.

During her 15-year tenure, her extraordinary talent and captivating stage presence was the impetus Ailey needed to create some of his most classic roles for her, notably the tour de force solo "Cry."

From the Ailey Company, Jamison starred in the hit Broadway musical, "Sophisticated Ladies." She has made appearances as a guest artist with the American Ballet Theatre, Harkness Ballet, The Vienna, Munich and Hamburg State Opera Ballets and Maurice Bejart's Ballet of the Twentieth Century.

Broadening her horizons meant that Judith would turn to choreography. In 1984, she choreographed her first work, "Divining." This work was followed by choreographing her first opera, "Mefistofele" and then her PBS special, "Judith Jamison: The Dancemaker."



ALVIN AILEY DANCERS

"Hymn," Jamison's powerful and moving tribute to Ailey, premiered during the company's 1993 New York season.

Jamison's 1995 ballet, "Riverside," had its premiere in the United States in December. Most recently, in 1996, collaborating for the first time with celebrated trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, she introduced her dynamic new work, "Sweet Release."

Jamison's dedicated hard work has not gone unnoticed. In recognition of her achievements, she has received numerous awards. In 1972, she was presented the "Dance Magazine" Award. Honored for her contributions to the field of performing arts, she was given the Philadelphia Arts Alliance Award, the Franklin Mint Award, the Candace Award, the Frontrunner Award, the Ebony Black Achievement Award and the

Outstanding Achievement in the Arts Award from Big Brothers/Big Sisters of New York City.

She is also the recipient of the Spirit of

Achievement Award, presented by the National Women's Division of Yeshiva University's Albert Einstein College of Medicine, the Golden Plate Award, presented to her by the American Academy of Achievement and the Distinguished Artists Award, presented by Club 100 of the Los Angeles Music Center. Her most recent award was a 1996 honorary doctorate from Harvard University—although she was awarded many other doctorates before this one.

Jamison energetically dodges efforts to focus on her or her talents and accomplishments. It's all about the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, she says.

Though Ailey is no longer with us, he still casts a strong shadow of influence on the company and Judith makes frequent reference to how important he is to the company, then and now.

She likes to talk about the company members whom she calls her "babies." Also, as artistic

director, her spotlight is on the young people recruited from around the world who appear in the one of the five regions of the United States where three hour-long auditions are conducted.

If they "make the cut," they may find themselves in either the first or second company, the repertory or the school.

Most of these young people (and many others) consider Jamison's book, "Dancing Spirit," which was published in 1993 to be a "must read."

This year, the company is scheduled to appear in 50 cities, give 225 concerts and conduct 50 workshops and master's classes. They will tour the United States, Japan, South Africa, and Europe. They tour more than any other dance company in the world. The group has 30 members, of whom 16 are male and 14 are female.

When Jamison creates a format or program for a concert, she attempts to portray certain elements. Her work is allegorical and

allows the dancers to portray pictures or images through motion and body language—effectively communicating spirituality and symbolism.

"I want the audience to take on an emotional experience," she says. "I tell the audience that I want the walls to fall away and for them to embrace the experience."

The vagaries of our economy, national politics and a definite focus away from the arts has caused other dance companies to fail. According to one of the AAADT's staffers, "The company feels fortunate that they work as often as they do, because other companies have been harder hit. It has caused budget cuts which create budget restraints. For example, it's rare to perform with live music and there is less rehearsal time."

Jamison feels very strongly about the support the National Endowment of the Arts has been to the company.

(See Alvin Ailey, Page 9)

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