

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Judith Jamison

PERSON

Jamison, Judith

Alternative Names: Judith Jamison;

Life Dates: May 10, 1943-

Place of Birth: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

Work: New York, NY

Occupations: Dancer; Choreographer

Biographical Note

Dancer and choreographer Judith Jamison was born on May 10, 1943 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Tessie Brown Jamison and John Jamison, Sr. While encouraged by her parents to study the piano and violin, Jamison gravitated towards ballet. At the age of six, Jamison began taking lessons at the Judimar School of Dance in Philadelphia. She went on to study the techniques of African American dance pioneer Katherine Dunham. Jamison graduated from Germantown High School in Philadelphia, and

enrolled at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. However, she left Fisk to study dance and kinesiology at the Philadelphia Dance Academy, now part of New York City's University of the Arts.

In 1964, Jamison earned critical acclaim for her work with choreographer Agnes de Mille and the American Ballet Theatre in New York. A year later, Alvin Ailey invited Jamison to join the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, where she was featured in numerous productions, toured with the company to Africa and Europe and earned international acclaim for her signature performance of *Cry*, a fifteen minute solo piece written by Ailey for Jamison. Jamison went on to appear as a guest performer with the San Francisco Ballet, the Swedish Royal Ballet, the Cullberg Ballet, and the Vienna State Ballet. In 1980, Jamison performed on Broadway in Duke Ellington's *Sophisticated Ladies* with Gregory Hines. That same year, Jamison began her own work as a choreographer. She premiered her first ballet, *Divining*, with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1984. In 1988, Jamison founded The Jamison Project Dance Company.

Jamison returned to the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1989, assuming the role of artistic director following the death of founder Alvin Ailey. In 1993, Jamison choreographed *Hymn*, a tribute to Ailey, and published her autobiography, *Dancing Spirit*. Under her leadership, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater joined forces with Fordham University to establish a joint bachelor of fine arts program with a multicultural dance curriculum. Jamison also spearheaded the construction of the company's first permanent home, the Joan Weill Center for Dance. Although Jamison stepped down as artistic director in 2011, she remained associated with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater as artistic director emerita.

Judith Jamison was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on August 30, 2016.

Related Entries

Charles W. Henry School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Fisk University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Germantown High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

University of the Arts [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

American Ballet Theatre [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1964 to 1964]

Dancer

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1964 to 1966]

Dancer & Choreographer

Harkness Ballet [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1966 to 1967]

Assistant to the Artistic Director

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1967 to 1980]

Dancer & Choreographer

Jacob's Pillow [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1981 to 1988]

Dance Instructor

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1989 to 2011]

Artistic Director

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 2011 to ?]

Artistic Director Emerita

Jacob's Pillow [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Board Member

Harkness Center for Dance Injuries [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Advisory Board Member

National Endowment for the Arts [MEMBEROF]
[from 1972 to 1976]

Board Member

Delta Sigma Theta [MEMBEROF]
[from 1992 to ?]

Honorary Member

American Academy of Arts and Sciences [MEMBEROF]
[from 2005 to ?]

Fellow