We're about more than being black

As the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater makes a long-awaited return to Sadler's Wells, its artistic director Judith Jamison talks to Ismene Brown about the company's changing identity

By Ismene Brown

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'When I auditioned for this company, maybe 70-something women came and 90 men; and that year they chose one woman and one man. I cried with joy. I didn't want to be anywhere else. It was always the Ailey company for me."

Willowy, giggly Dwana Smallwood is 27, and a dancer in the celebrated Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Many would define it as the leading black dance company in the world, and when Sadler's Wells invited it back to London for the first time in a decade last autumn, a sell-out was a sure bet.

Those performances did not happen, due to the terrorist attacks in America the previous week, but rescheduling means that on June 24, once again, that new, more mixed audience Sadler's Wells expects to attend can turn up to applaud a company seen as a standard-bearer for beautiful black moves and high emotion.

For the late Alvin Ailey, a 27-year-old young Texan when he founded his company in 1958, modern dance was the language he wanted to express himself in - partly to give black people their own voice in a field largely dominated by Martha Graham's dramatic myths and Merce Cunningham's obscure intellectual games.

Ailey's popular touch was his trump card. He sought to reach the public through his own rural Southern day-to-day experience, and his effect on modern dance was revelatory. That is a fitting word, since no ballet is more famous in America than Revelations, one of Ailey's early creations, which, with its heady mix of gospel music, spiritual uplift and emotional directness, has attained an almost legendary place in public affections around the world for 42 years.

Matthew Rushing was 13 when he saw Revelations, and the revelation came upon him, without warning, that he must be a dancer, and with the Ailey company. "My goals were actually to get into computers, but when my mother took me to this performance, I was just blown away. I had just recently been baptised, and in the baptismal section of Revelations I knew exactly what it was all about. To me, these dancers were supernatural, and I decided that day that I would be in the Ailey company."

Now 28, Rushing is considered one of the "supernaturals" in AAADT. For both him and Dwana Smallwood the blackness of the Ailey identity has undoubtedly been a strong pull, but still more magnetic is its vast variety and eclecticism. It runs from jazz to ballet, offering a dancer arguably the broadest challenge of any American company today.

Ailey himself made 79 dances, many to his favourite jazz composer Duke Ellington, but some, unexpectedly, to modern English classicists such as Benjamin Britten and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Since he died in 1989, the repertory, under the leadership of one of his great dancers, Judith Jamison, has expanded to 180 dances, ranging from Ailey classics to the new choreography constantly being devised by the company's dancers and by invited choreographers, black and white.

The two Sadler's Wells programmes kick off with new ballets by names unknown in Britain, Ron Brown and Alonzo King, as well as more established AAADT ballets by Ulysses Dove, Judith Jamison and Ailey himself, with Revelations closing both bills.

"People understand this ballet all over the world," explains Jamison, an ebullient,

forceful woman of 58, with a rather goddess-like hairdo. "It's such a spiritual, moving piece, I love it. People see it's about trial and tribulation, and how you come through it. About the strength and spirit and pride and tenacity of people to power through. Everybody's been through that."

Being asked about the colour issue makes Jamison a little tetchy. It is easy to get into a minefield here, because everyone knows that being seen as "black" has helped AAADT become one of the richest dance companies in America, with public grants of $14 million a year, a larger budget than our Royal Ballet, and with only 31 dancers. On the other hand, Jamison insists, this is no special-favour company - "excellence" is all she cares about, and there have always been non-black dancers in the company (her assistant director, Masazumi Chaya, a 30-year veteran, is Japanese). And in addition, the tremendous activity in the Ailey building in Manhattan - now it is two dancing companies with 200-plus weekly classes, workshops and educational activities - pulses with a sense of freeing the disadvantaged, whoever they may be.

"When Alvin started in 1958, it was a time of turmoil. He said at the beginning that he wanted it to be a vessel for the black experience. For instance, Blues Suite [his first piece] and Revelations were from his experience as an African-American coming from Rogers, Texas, with his mother taking him to little tiny churches in the backwoods of the South, the women coming in their finest attire - and these were poor people, people getting out their finest, fanciest rags for the church.

"But now there are 180 ballets in the repertory, and they are not all about that. Along with anyone's heritage is the humanity of being a person of this world. I've got to wake up black every day, just like you've got to wake up white every day. But we are all more than just that experience."

She adds pointedly: "When I see Swan Lake, I don't just go, 'Oh look, white dancers.' I go, 'How good are you?' This company is about excellence."

For all Jamison's explanations, she does sometimes attract criticism that the artistic identity of the company nowadays is somewhat confused with its social, "black" identity. Today the Ailey company has an image of powerful, confident and athletic glamour that shares with media and fashion culture the desire to emphasise the positive, and make universal declarations about empowerment or suffering, rather than express the private dilemmas that make for interesting art.

However, Dwana Smallwood, one of today's new breed, defines the essence of the Ailey dancer as something remaining deeply spiritual, epitomised by Judith Jamison herself.

"She dances from a place that is so intimate," Smallwood explains, "and she reveals a part of herself that is supposed to be private, but she allows everybody to look at it - on her call. That is a craft. It is a gift that the Creator has given her, but that she moulded. She wastes nothing, she throws away no movement, she understands that dance really is a language. I want to be like that."

This sort of talk is highly inspiring, and it's an ethos that I heard in several Ailey personnel. Perhaps it sounds very American, and yet it's the contagion of positive thinking that bred the Ailey phenomenon. Undoubtedly the sheer size of the black population in the States has given the AAADT wings, and yet this company's triumph is surely more to do with its sheer common touch, its evangelical capacity to make

ordinary, ignorant audiences feel stirring feelings. In the end, the only test is that those feelings, in retrospect, felt true.

- Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is at Sadler's Wells, June 24-29 (020 7863 8000)

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