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A Muse and a Leader Embodied Power and Poise

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A Muse and a Leader With Vigor and Poise

THE OVATION LASTED for almost 10 minutes. The solo that prompted it was only six minutes longer.

Before the premiere of Alvin Ailey's "Cry" in 1971, Judith Jamison was hardly an unknown quantity. But after it, she was a singular sensation, a headliner, the embodiment of poise and power. From then on she was unofficially America's most celebrated Black female dancer — maybe even the world's.

Jamison, who died on Saturday at 81, owned every room she walked into. She was alive from every angle, a force of three-dimensional expression. In all of her dancing there was her electrifying body, long and tall, the image of towering dignity. Her stature was imposing, but she was pliant, too — a container of sensations. She could move.

"Cry," a solo in which a dancer explores a woman's path from slavery and loss to a state of grace, was her signature role. Ailey dedicated it to "all Black women everywhere — especially our mothers," and in it Jamison was a rapturous pillar of strength and sorrow.

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Judith Jamison, an image of towering dignity, was a star of Alvin Ailey's dance company as a dancer and then as its artistic director.

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After the costume she was meant to wear in "Cry" was deemed unsuitable at the last minute, two leotards were combined to add extra material to the sleeves. That's how long her arms were. In motion, they seemed to grow out of her back like willowy branches reaching longer and longer still, as if daring to touch the sun.

A film from a 1972 gala shows Jamison in the second section of "Cry," set to Laura Nyro's "Been on a Train." As she spins across the floor, her arms are propellers guiding her spiraling torso. There is a pause in the music, and Jamison quiets, too, dropping an arm in resignation before descending to the floor in a slow-motion contraction. Later, to the lyric, "there's nothing left to say or do," Jamison, seated, parts her legs, rocking her torso in tiny circles. She reaches, her fingers splayed and delivers the cry of the title — a silent scream, inspired by a photograph in Life magazine of a woman with a baby during the Biafran War.

The way emotion seeps into her dancing, even on video, is searing. It's not pasted on, it's not separate from her physicality. The power of that impulsiveness makes it seem as if she could reach for feelings deep inside her body and urge them past her skin to unfurl into the world.

Jamison was Ailey's muse, as complicated as that word is, and she was able to bring his feelings, his ideas to life because of who she was. "It is a face born to cry the blues," Clive Barnes wrote in The Times, when she premiered in "Cry." "But when she smiles it is with an innocent radiance, a joyfulness that is simple and lovely."

But that didn't mean that the choreographic process for "Cry" was simple, or that the dance was one note. There was, between Ailey and Jamison, some heat, some tension — a relationship, writes Jennifer Dunning in her Ailey biography, of both love



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and hate. During the eight-day creation of "Cry," Dunning writes, "There were battles of will between the two, who were both dieting hard and working under the gun to get the dance done quickly."

Jamison left Ailey for Broadway in 1980, and formed her own group, the Jamison

Alive from every angle, a force of three-dimensional expression.

Judith Jamison in Alvin Ailey's "Cry," which premiered in 1971. The work was Jamison's signature role.

Project, in 1988. After Alvin Ailey died, in 1989, she stepped into the artistic directorship of the company. It was natural that the muse became the leader, the guiding light, because as a muse she was a leader, too: building dances, right alongside Ailey, with her body and mind.

It's difficult to wrap my head around the timing of her death. It's a loss that mingles with the disappointment, exhaustion and anger that so many Black women feel in the wake of Kamala Harris's loss in the presidential election. The first section of "Cry," Jamison explained in a video about the work, was "about how much we are carrying as Black women. How much we are celebrated or not celebrated as queens. How hard we work."

Jamison carried a lot. As Ailey's artistic director for 21 years, she helped to make the company into something bigger than dance, just as she, in a way, was bigger than dance. The Ailey company is thriving, with a prized place in culture, but to get it there must have required some personal sacrifice from Jamison, including her own independent dance career.

But Jamison was real, too. Ralph Lemon, the choreographer and visual artist, got to know her when she was teaching at Jacob's Pillow in the late 1980s. "I have such a clear picture of her driving around the Pillow in her Jeep and wearing overalls," he said in an email. She seemed happy and free: "It was a wonderful counterpoint to the image I had of her prior," he wrote, "her more goddess-like iconic presence in the Ailey universe."

What a snapshot! You can almost see that smile, too, radiant and alive.