

# CELEBRATING A SHARED HERITAGE

## *Iconic Dance Company Returns To Its Second Home*



PHOTO BY DARIO CALMESE

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Jacquelin Harris

By Patrick Neas

In describing his own work, the great American dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey once wrote, “Its roots are in American Negro culture, which is part of the whole country’s heritage, but the dance speaks to everyone.”

Alvin Ailey died in 1989, but his dance continues to speak to everyone. Kansas City audiences have had a special affinity for Ailey’s unique art ever since the Harriman-Jewell Series presented the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Gano Hall on the campus of William Jewell College when the company embarked on its first American tour in 1968.

Now, in collaboration with the Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey, the Harriman-Jewell Series will present the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater on March 24 at the Muriel Kauffman Theatre. The Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey will present the company on March 25.

“Richard Harriman first brought them here on March 12, 1968, a few months before I was born,” Clark Morris, executive and artistic director of the Harriman-Jewell Series said. “He told me that Alvin Ailey actually drove his station wagon across the country on that tour. It was a grassroots effort.”

The next time the Series presented Ailey’s company was Feb. 19, 1971. That performance, which was also in Gano Hall in Liberty, Missouri, led to the Series moving its performances to downtown Kansas City.

Judith Jamison, who was the star of the company in those early days and who eventually became Alvin Ailey’s successor as director of the company, complained to Harriman after that second performance, “I’ll never dance here again.” She was unhappy because she was dancing on a chapel stage not designed for dance.

“Her criticism prompted Richard to find a venue in downtown Kansas City,” Morris said. “He ended up using the Lyric Theatre for the performance. So that was a milestone when we started to look to downtown Kansas City for more appropriate theater spaces where we could better serve artists and the audience.”





Members of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Following the two Gano Hall performances, Harriman would present the company at the Lyric in 1972 and 1973 and at the Music Hall in 1975, five performances in fairly rapid succession. The Ailey company was obviously making a connection with Kansas City audiences.

But not everyone was happy about the company coming to Kansas City. At one of the Lyric performances, Harriman received a bomb threat.

“Richard took it as a racist threat and he took it seriously,” Morris said. “He had the bomb squad come in and check out the theater. It turned out there wasn’t a bomb. So, when the bomber called the box office a second time right before curtain to say there was a bomb, Richard shouted into the phone, ‘No, there’s not!’ and hung up.”

In 1984, the Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey was founded. The Friend’s mission is to teach young people critical life skills through dance and to model interracial and multicultural partnerships in the community. The Friends of Alvin Ailey is the official second home of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

“We would never claim complete credit for creating the Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey, but Richard was very helpful in getting the organization started,” Morris said. “The Harriman-Jewell Series has always felt like we are sister organizations with a shared heritage together.”

Morris says that the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is “probably the best-funded, most solid modern dance companies in the world.” Which is good news for the many fans who want to see the Ailey company’s athleticism, grace and artistry thrive and prosper.

“What Alvin did was capture something that is completely American that people can really appreciate and love,” Morris said. “The company has toured 71 different countries. They’ve done tours sponsored by the State Department. They are a wonderful representation of our culture, and, as Americans, they are something we can truly be proud of.”

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, 7:30 p.m., March 24, Muriel Kauffman Theatre, Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts.

For tickets and a complete listing of all concerts, go to [hjseries.org](https://hjseries.org).