



## S5E6: Transcript Dance and Human Flourishing with Judith Jamison

**Tavia Gilbert:**

Welcome to Stories of Impact. I'm writer/producer Tavia Gilbert. Every first and third Tuesday, journalist Richard Sergay and I bring you conversations about the art and science behind innovative tools that help human beings flourish, and this season, we hear from world experts about all facets of human flourishing.

Today's guest is international superstar dancer/choreographer Judith Jamison. In 1964, at just 21 years old, Jamison made her dance debut in New York with the American Ballet Theater. She soon joined the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, eventually becoming the company's principal dancer, then its artistic director, and, since 2011, she's been the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater artistic director emerita.

The lives and legacies of these two extraordinary, Black American dancers – Alvin Ailey and Judith Jamison – are inextricably linked. When he recruited the 22-year-old to perform in his innovative, multiracial modern dance company, Ailey was inviting Jamison to contribute to the conversation and craft of modern dance in America in a time when racist policies and people were violently resisting racial integration. In 1966, Jamison toured Europe and Africa, performing the company's robust repertoire – a body of work that spoke directly to the experience of being African-American.

Now, more than fifty years after that first world tour, in conversation with Richard, Jamison shares wisdom, insights, and inspiration

gained in a lifetime immersed in the art of movement, and what lessons from Ailey she continues to offer students and dancers today.

**Judith Jamison:** There's an American culture of things being created here, on this soil, and being wound and twisted and elevated or reduced or whatever, you know, that's that creative process. And that, to me, is very important when Ailey Company is representing the United States, that we have care in carrying our cultures. And Mr. Ailey made sure it was cultures.

The company was founded to celebrate the African American cultural expression and experience in the modern dance tradition of our country, you know, so that includes a whole lot of people, as America is supposed to include, right? Mr. Ailey thought it was very important to bring in work that said, "This is American, this is American, this is American," so we could show that wonderful diversity that we fight for every day, we could show that diversity and be proud of that, because that's what makes an American company unique.

He was the first modern dance company to have repertory, and with not just Black people in the company, but everybody who could dance. He said, I don't care if you're green, can you dance?

**Tavia Gilbert:** Dance lifted the hearts and lives of both Jamison and Ailey, whose father abandoned him at the height of the Great Depression, when Ailey was just three months old. He was raised in a small Texas town by his teenage mother, and they withstood hard physical labor in the cotton fields and as domestic servants, violent racism, and sexual assault.

Though he endured so much suffering, Ailey channeled that pain into a dance repertory designed to have a social impact. These were stories of resilience, celebrations of strength and dignity, including the signature solo choreographed for Jamison, *Cry*, an intense, demanding 16-minute dance Ailey dedicated to "all Black women everywhere, especially...mothers." Ailey and Jamison knew trauma and grief connected them to humans of all creeds and colors.

**Judith Jamison:** I had the basis of church and pageantry in the church. And I could grasp, I thought I could grasp what being poor was, but, you know, Mr. Ailey's

story is whoo, that is something. And that we should be able to take it everywhere around the world and you don't have to know a negro spiritual. You don't have to know Horton technique. You don't have to, well, you don't have to know anything. Just come into the theater and hear the richness in what they're singing, even if you don't understand. It's rather like listening to opera. You know when Pavarotti is singing *Nessun Dorma*, when he sings that, you don't necessarily have to understand what he's singing about. Just listen to that voice, you know?

**Tavia Gilbert:**

In 1960, when he was just 29 years old, Ailey premiered his modern dance, *Revelations*, which became his best-known work and the Dance Theater's signature performance. Choreographed to spirituals, gospel, and blues, the dance tells the story of the anguish of slavery and the joy in baptism and Christian rebirth, a uniquely American story with universal appeal.

**Judith Jamison:**

Because it's universal that we have been to trials and tribulations and that we've suffered, and you name somebody who hasn't. But let us say that when you hear the first strains of, "I've been buked and I've been scorned," but you can see the yearning in the dancers' faces and in the outstr—their hands are like this, outstretched hands, looking heavenward, looking earthward, looking heavenward, that already says something with a minimal amount of movement. If you got through the sadness of, of "Fix me, Jesus" and "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel," and "Wading in the Water," and "Sinner Man," and "I Want to be Ready," and you get to "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham," there are people that just want to pick up tambourines, and understand that that is flourishing.

When you go on the entire journey through the sadness, through everything that life offers, in this one half hour classic work, and it finishes with joy. So from struggle, everything in between, and then you finish with joy — not happy, but with joy, genuine joy — that's flourishing. That means we've made a connection with you. And believe you me, dancing it, it felt good to hear people understand it, to understand that this was something very seriously embedded in African American culture, which is human, (LAUGHS) human beings, going through this journey, to flourishing, you know?

**Tavia Gilbert:**

Repertory like *Revelations* affirms that suffering is a necessary part of life, and without it, flourishing cannot follow.

**Judith Jamison:** Do we have to go through all this to flourish, do we have to suffer like this to flourish? I think if you're living life, you know, you don't aim to suffer. But that's life. You know, it happens, it goes on, you know?

So the best thing you can be doing is being as prepared as possible. Having the strength and the love and understanding what's abiding in your heart. And understanding when you look at that person in the mirror, in the morning, you better be looking at who you really are, and not the facade that you may necessarily put on when you're out in the street.

But as soon as you start with the truth of self, you know, and get rid of what you got to get rid of, and then face the world – this is work, it's hard – but face the world, going through it like, this is life, tomorrow's life, the next day, be glad you have the life you have. And then be able to understand how strong you are.

You know, people have had time to think now, haven't they? If they haven't come to some revelation by now, they're never coming into it. You know what I'm saying? Because there are places in the heart that should flourish, you know, once you see some beautiful, creative piece – not necessarily beautiful, it can be crass and not good and ugly and blah, blah, but at least you're having an experience, you know what I'm saying? I think all of, from the bottom to the top of what life can be, and the middle, all helps us to be nourished, so that we can flourish.

**Tavia Gilbert:** Ailey wanted his company's astonishing body of work to resonate long after the piece was over, to deepen empathy, community, peace. Dance was his love language.

**Judith Jamison:** Just staying connected with each other, he wanted us to unite so badly, through our dancing and through our love of music and through our love of art and through caring for other people. He would say that to us. You care, you genuinely have to care for people that you wish to have in your life. You have to care, and you have to love what you're doing, absolutely love what you're doing, and realizing it's not just for you.

That also means community, because Mr. Ailey was teaching and telling us that's been his mantra, that was our mantra, forever, as long as the company has been in existence, that you are dancing for people. You are not dancing in a vacuum.

**Tavia Gilbert:** Jamison's hope has always been the same as Ailey's: that the universal, physical, visceral love language of dance would leave audiences electrified. Galvanized.

**Judith Jamison:** Mr. Ailey used to say, you gotta dance, you have to educate, and you have to entertain, because it's a business, it's show business, you know! So there's a responsibility that you have to have this collective experience without trying. You have to try. You know, all you have to do is sit down, fasten your seat belt, and hopefully something will come across your path that will make you feel different when you leave the theater, when you see a painting, when someone plays something, when someone sings something, when you see a show.

To thrill the audience, move them, to move them one direction or the other direction, to have a moment of connecting with who you are as a human being – that, to me, is what anything in the arts are supposed to do. It's supposed to move you one way, the other way up, down, sideways, I hate it, I love it, blah blah blah blah blah. But have a reaction, you know.

**Tavia Gilbert:** Other dancers and other cultures' dances continue to fascinate and delight Jamison. Dance is the story of human history, offering audiences and dancers communion with generations past and present, with ancestral memory that exists at the cellular level.

**Judith Jamison:** All these wonderful cultures around the world, I go to different places, and you see these variations on who's dancing what, and how are they moving that way, and what music are they using, and you know, it's far from me. But then something hooks in, because what they're doing, sometimes, especially in Western Africa, I've seen dance, I've seen it in nine countries across the continent.

And it didn't even touch what hundreds of dances in a certain area of a certain state of a certain country – they're all different, they might use different instruments, whatever, but there's something very recognizable in how they're moving. You know? And I'll see that in, you know, tap dancing. I'll see that in, when I think of Irish jigs and tap, you know, and have that combined to make some of the greatest dancers in the world.

That's coming from something, you know, it's coming from a root, it's coming from something that means something to people, and I think audiences recognize that we care about them, number one, otherwise we wouldn't be dancing our heads off. And that also, we're there to just make them feel different. So when they leave the theater, then you know, you kind of walk on air, when you're leaving the theater, we've had a celebration.

We're dancing for you. And that dance did come from people, people were dancing for a reason.

I think because we have blood memories, if you're a dancer, there's a heartbeat in you that's telling you, you know, people, hundreds of millions of 1000s, however long we've been on this planet, they weren't out here dancing, performing. They were dancing for rain, and for babies, and for crops. And so, there's a connection there, that it turned into performance, and got thrilled and flourished in that kind of way.

**Tavia Gilbert:** Jamison can imagine how dancing for rain, babies, crops, organically grew into dancing for joy, for art, and for human connection. Richard recalls Ailey's words:

**Richard Sergay:** Dance comes from the people and is delivered back to the people. It's about embracing everyone.

**Judith Jamison:** Then we started putting in all kinds of grace notes, and accoutrements, and all kinds of things. And then all of a sudden, the lightbulb goes on in a generation where they go, oh my goodness, that person is connecting to what it is to be human. And when Alvin says that dance came from the people, he's talking about, not necessarily our audiences, because most of them, you know, people don't come to the theater as dancers, but the dance itself, dances that were created on street corners, dances that came from blood memories, dances that came with, with an idea of — the whole idea of creativity, of facing yourself in a mirror and creating something based on your truth.

And Mr. Ailey thought that dance could only come to you, when you recognize that you're not dancing in a vacuum, and that you're creating something that's supposed to move people. And you have to realize that it came from them in the first place.

**Tavia Gilbert:** Jamison's work as a dancer not only made her an international star, it was physical language she used to tell the story of generations of powerful, resilient Black women – their pain, suffering, and loss, as well as their strength and triumph. Her body was her voice.

**Judith Jamison:** Because there were no words in what I was saying when I would go on stage. So I would use it, and I asked dancers to, whatever you're going, your life, it's your life, whatever you're going through, use it. Use it! You're not the only one that's going through madness, you know what I'm saying?.

So you use it and you make sure that nothing really spills out on the sides, that you're really concentrated in knowing, I'm about to show you something that maybe you've never seen before. And it's not necessarily a protest ballet, it's not necessarily a riot ballet, it's not necessarily any specific piece that Mr. Ailey created, where he wanted to elevate the story of our struggle. But part of the struggle was, I'm a creative person, this is what he used to say, I'm a creative person, that means I can create anything, I don't have to create one thing. So therefore the 75 ballets that he created when he was alive are not all about the same thing. They're about everything he experienced as a human being. And that was supposed to help bring people together to understand, "I know that, too," you know?

**Tavia Gilbert:** As the dance company toured, communicating a message of interracial brotherhood, of connection and inclusion, of transcendence, they knew not all of their American brothers and sisters were receptive.

**Judith Jamison:** Our marvelous company director, Bill Hammond, he was a southern white guy who used to book the company into hotels, and he'd go ahead of us arriving there to make sure, he had to tell people, there are black people coming into the – but what, whatever, I just remember, whatever you're going to throw at me, I'm going to give it back to you in the most beautiful way, in the most exquisite way I possibly could. And with love, with absolute love, because I love what I do. And I'm here to share it with you. Sometimes you don't want to, you know, share it with me, that's okay, too. As long as I can snag you into the theater I'll get you, I'll share something with you.

And so from generation to generation, you don't ignore what's going on, you certainly know what's going on, you know, but you put it in a place, or I used to put it in a place where I could use it.

**Tavia Gilbert:** Communion with other dancers has been the root of both Jamison's and Ailey's flourishing. Their astonishing physical expressions made both these artists' lives and craft rich and deep. And it's still what, at nearly 80 years old, keeps Jamison passionate and vibrant today.

**Judith Jamison:** What makes me flourish is being around dancers! Just being around them, you know, and working with them, and feeling that energy coming off of them, because we're all on the same plane, we're all there, and we're all after the same, sublimeness. And that, when that happens to you, it's, it's – I can't even explain it. It's like your feet are not on the ground. They're above the ground, even though everything might be hurting you as you're dancing [laughs], you know, that you might be in a great deal of pain.

But the love of what you're doing, and I also mention to dancers, their sense of humor – if you can't have levity in your life, then forget that, if you can't laugh, you know? It sounds like an ideal life, laughing, loving, [laughs] you know, having your heart open. And that leads to vulnerability, which is just fine.

People are afraid of that vulnerability when they're out in the world. And it takes finding that right person or being in a performance, and sitting there and feeling what that love feels like, because it's being given to you. And you can sense it. Gosh, these dancers must love what they're doing. Yes, they do. Yes, they do. And it's not coming from a superficial place.

**Tavia Gilbert:** It has never been enough for Jamison to be masterfully athletic in her work. She has always embraced work that has demanded every fiber of her being – her body, her heart, her mind, her soul. And thus, the full inhabitation of each dance has been her lifelong spiritual practice.

**Judith Jamison:** If you don't have a feeling, for me, that you could be lifted in mind, body and spirit, when you're a dancer, you think all those things. When you see a spectacular jump, or somebody can really, you know, shoo, do a grand jete and jump like that, you don't think

they're spiritually lifted? Some of them may not be, some of them may just be able to jump high, you know. But when you see that dancer go soaring across the stage, or when I was dancing, and I could go soaring across— that was the closest thing to what I, the other thing I wanted to do in my life, which was be a pilot, that was the closest I could get to it.

And to this day, I still, I still watch planes from my view. I love that kind of power, and that kind of gigantic scope of what you're actually in control of, until you think of the spirit. And then when I think of the spirit, and I grew up in the church, then that's what's lifting me.

Art, any kind of art, any kind of creativity, that's worth its weight, is there to put comfort around your heart and your mind and your spirit.

**Tavia Gilbert:**

Judith Jamison embodies, literally, the myriad facets of flourishing. She has inhabited the full experience of life, acting as a medium for her audience — sharing universal stories of the human condition — from sorrow to celebration. Her body has embraced the blood memories of cultures around the planet, and her voice, both physical and verbal, resonates with the wisdom and experience of generations. I'm electrified by the way she carries flourishing with her blood, bone, and sinew, and I am moved. Please be sure to check the show notes for a link to a video of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in performance. It's an experience you absolutely don't want to miss.

In two weeks, we'll be back in conversation with another extraordinary woman: Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland. Here's a preview:

**Mary Robinson:**

The impacts of climate change are more severe on women and girls, again, because of their different social roles. And they're more severe if girls have to stay out of education because the school has been destroyed, pushed into early child marriage. They're more severe because women still have to put food on the table, as I said.

Women are not just victims, they're also agents for change. And that's something that I'm very keen to show in a very visible way.

**Tavia Gilbert:**

We'll be back for the full conversation in two weeks. In the meantime, if you appreciate the Story of Impact podcast, please follow the podcast, and rate and review us. We're on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, and you can find us at [storiesofimpact.org](http://storiesofimpact.org).

This has been the Stories of Impact Podcast, with Richard Sergay and Tavia Gilbert. Written and produced by Talkbox Productions and Tavia Gilbert, with associate producer Katie Flood. Music by Aleksander Filipiak. Mix and master by Kayla Elrod. Executive producer Michele Cobb.

The Stories of Impact Podcast is generously supported by Templeton World Charity Foundation.