

DENISE JEFFERSON, DIRECTOR OF THE AILEY SCHOOL PASSES AWAY

Monday, July 19, 2010

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ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

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New York — The Ailey family is deeply saddened to announce the passing of Denise Jefferson, who, for the past 26 years, was the director and impassioned steward of The Ailey School. She died on Saturday night in New York of ovarian cancer.

Appointed as director by Alvin Ailey in 1984, after teaching at the School for 10 years, Ms. Jefferson — affectionately referred to as Ms. J — has been instrumental in identifying the potential, and mentoring myriad students as they began their journey to becoming some of the greatest dance artists in the world. "Powerful," "technical," "elegant," "consistent," "beautiful," "fierce," "a force of nature" — these are some of the adjectives most commonly used to describe Ailey students. They are also the words that best describe Denise Jefferson.

Words cannot express the magnitude of Denise's loss to both the Ailey organization and to the world of dance. It is a testament to her leadership that 87% of current Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater dancers honed their skills through training from The Ailey School. Dancers trained under Denise's nurturing direction have also gone on to successful careers in the ranks of other prominent national and international dance companies, including Martha Graham Dance Company, Hubbard Street Dance, Mark Morris Dance Company, Ballet Frankfurt, Ballet Nacional de Espana and Nederlands Dans Theater, among countless others.

Denise Jefferson's indefatigable dedication and clear vision of the elements required to train world-class dancers, produced a challenging, innovative and sophisticated program that is sought out by students from around the world. Since its inception, The Ailey School has attracted students from 93 countries. Denise traveled the globe teaching and offering opportunities for the most talented dancers to receive unparalleled dance training at The Ailey School. Her foresight and ingenuity led her to break new ground in 1998 with the development of the innovative Ailey/Fordham BFA Program, which offers students the best of two worlds— the artistic pre-eminence of the official school affiliated with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, combined with an exceptional liberal arts education from Fordham University.

With a firm but compassionate hand, Denise demanded excellence from both students and faculty members; instilling discipline, an astounding work ethic, and respect for the form. She took great pride in the fact that one can always tell a student who was trained at The Ailey School — not only because of their ability, but also due to their professionalism. Tracy Inman and Melanie Person have been named Acting Co-Directors of The Ailey School and Ana Marie Forsythe has been appointed Acting Director of the Ailey/Fordham BFA program.

Denise Jefferson was born in Chicago, Illinois, where she began her ballet studies with Edna L. McRae. After receiving a B.A. in French from Wheaton College and an M.A. in French from New York University, she was awarded a scholarship to Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance and, after one year, began her professional career with the Pearl Lang Dance Company.

While her professional achievements were great and many, it was Denise's humor, wit, grace and authenticity that made everyone who knew her love and appreciate her. Denise is survived by her daughter Francesca Harper, her sister Margo Jefferson and her loving mother Irma Jefferson. Her legacy will endure and her spirit will forever have life through all of the dancers she influenced. Whenever a curtain goes up, Denise's light will be cast upon us, and warm us, and we will remember.

A celebratory memorial concert is being planned at The Ailey Studios for a later date. At the request of the family, donations may be made in her memory to the Denise Jefferson Scholarship Fund at The Ailey School.

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