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Alvin Ailey Announces It's New Season Under New Leadership

By Jozen Cummings



When **Robert Battle** moved to New York City from his hometown of Miami, Florida in 1990, his mother gave him a piece of advice: Don't look up at the tall buildings. Today, with sunshine pouring through floor-to-ceiling windows, Battle stood in the center of a dance studio on the fifth floor of New York City's largest, if not tallest, structure dedicated solely to dance, The Joan Weill Center For Dance, where he formally announced new works for his debut season as artistic director of the **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater**.

The occasion marks a historic transitional moment in the history of the Ailey company. When he takes the reins officially on July 1, Battle will be only the third artistic director since the company was founded in 1958. **Judith Jamison (pictured below)**, the company's second artistic director chosen by **Alvin Ailey** himself in 1989, will assume the role as artistic director emerita, a role which will allow her to be behind the scenes, but not as intimately involved as she is now. Before she introduced Battle, Jamison told the studio full of press, board members and dancers: "You will not see me hanging around, believe me. That is not why I asked this man to do this."

Battle's relationship with the Ailey Dance Theater began in 1999, when he was brought to Jamison's attention by **Sylvia Waters**, who currently directs the junior company, Ailey II. He has been a frequent choreographer and artist-in-residence at Ailey, choreographing 11 works for both companies and the Ailey School. But nothing he has done with the company is comparable to the responsibilities of his new role.

More than 20 different works will be presented during Battle's inaugural season, which begins on November 30 at **New York City Center**. At the press conference, Battle discussed six of those works, and featured a performance of 'Takedeme,' an engrossing, kinetic burst of choreography set to the a cappella prattle and scat of the English pop singer **Sheila Chandra**. The piece is a reprisal of the work that many say put him on the map. "I thought, what a great opportunity to show that work," said Battle, who created the piece in the tight confines of a living room in a Queens apartment. "It has something to do with little to nothing and now having a lot, but not forgetting where you come from."

Another sentimental work being presented will be the world premier of a piece by hip-hop choreographer **Rennie Harris**. Harris and Battle worked together (along with Jamison) in 2004 for the work, 'Love Stories.' This time, the still-untitled piece choreographed by Harris, is inspired by poems, stories, and images about people living with or affected by HIV. The piece will premier on December 1, **World AIDS Day**, a day which has added significance because the company's founder died from AIDS-related illness on December 1, 1989. "This is a way of remembering, but also a way of saying we're moving forward," Battle said.

For the Ailey company, Jamison, and Battle, moving forward and continuing the company's rich tradition of being the torch-bearer for modern dance is especially important. As Jamison said in her opening remarks, one of the reasons Battle was chosen was because he is a young talent, a couple years shy of turning 40-years-old. "I emphasize young, because I want to see the company go on for another 50 years," Jamison said.

Battle has the same plan as he pursues his mission to preserve the legacy of Ailey. With an ear-to-ear grin, and the happy energy of a dancer eager to show off his best moves, Battle closed his speech by saying, "The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, over 50 years old? Yes, here we are. Another 50 years more? Yes, absolutely."

