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Living

Q&A Robert Battle, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

'The dancers, they are the real inspiration'

Plans exist for troupe's future but new artistic director has ideas, too.

By Howard Pousner
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Choreographer Robert Battle was Judith Jamison's choice to succeed her as Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's artistic director well before a board search committee made his appointment official last April.

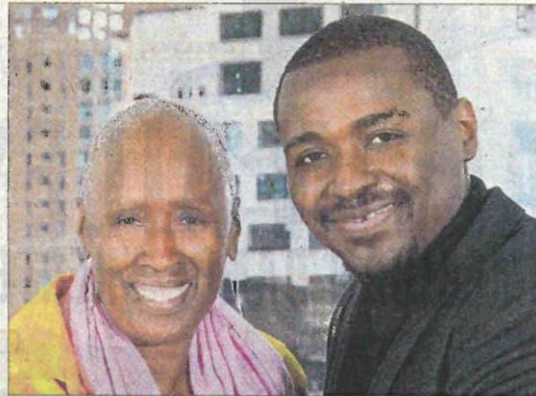
Jamison repeatedly paid an ultimate compliment to Battle, comparing him to the company's late founder, whom she succeeded in 1989. "He's edgy and forward-

Dance preview
Alvin Ailey
American Dance Theater

7:30 p.m. Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday. \$20-\$60. Fox Theatre, 660 Peachtree St. N.E., Atlanta. Saturday matinee deal: Buy one, half off second ticket. 1-800-745-3000; www.alvinaley.org/atlanta, www.foxtheatre.org.

thinking, very talented and savvy – a lovely, intelligent person who in many ways reminds me of Alvin," Jamison said of Battle, 38.

Ailey continued on D7



Robert Battle is Judith Jamison's choice for artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. He'll take over in July.
Paul Kolnik Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Troupe moves forward

Ailey
continued from D1

The forward-thinking part is what persuaded Ailey's board to entrust Battle, a Miami native, Juillard School graduate and Battleworks Dance Company founder, with the responsibility. Since 1999, he has set nine works on Ailey's main company; its junior troupe, Ailey II; and the Ailey school.

With its two performing companies and multiple programs based at its glossy New York headquarters, which is billed as the nation's largest building for dance, the Ailey troupe is one of the country's most stable arts institutions at an unstable time. But some reviewers and even board members have spoken about the need to balance respect for Ailey's storied history with a daring 21st century vision. Battle takes the reins in July.

Ailey visits Atlanta on a 24-city North American tour for four days of performances starting Thursday. The varying Fox Theatre programs will feature company classics such as "Revelations" and "Three Black Kings" as well as Battle's "The Hunt," an athletic work for six men set to a percussive soundtrack by Les Tambours du Bronx.

We spoke recently to Battle, who visited Atlanta ahead of his dancers:

Q: You must have been thrilled when you were appointed. But was it also immediately daunting, too?

A: When people say,



Robert Battle is choreographer of the Ailey troupe's "The Hunt." Paul Kolnik Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

"This must be scary for you," I say, well, yeah, as a performer you're used to a bit of that. The moment you start to walk onstage and you have no fear, you have no career either.

But there's also Judith Jamison who looked at me, brought me in to make ballets many times, who knows who I am, and said I believe you can do this. That to me says everything. So when I think about that, it kind of makes that little nervous stuff seem petty. I think, let's get on with it.

Then when I look at the dancers, they are the real inspiration. When I watch the dancers on that stage, I just feel so honored to be where I am, knowing that I've been offered this opportunity to make a difference. That to me is powerful, and I intend to use it well.

Q: At this early juncture, do you have a sense of how the company may change?

A: I often hear Miss Jamison talk about this, that there is a road map that has been beautifully laid out of what we're about – in terms of finding new voices, giving them the opportunity and sharing them with our audiences and also honoring our rich history of

modern dance.

Of course, my tastes are sometimes different, so you'll see things and say, "Hah, I never thought of that." Hopefully, you will like them. We're going to do them anyway!

Q: How do you plan to nurture emerging choreographers?

A: I'm really looking at how can we identify some of these voices and give them certain opportunities that are more process driven than just product driven. Because I think these young artists and even midlevel choreographers, they have to feel safe enough to fail, they have to be given an opportunity to dream a little bit and not just play it safe because you've got two weeks, and it has to be good or you won't get invited back. What about, it just has to come from your heart?

So I'm looking at how we can create a long relationship of nurturing with these artists. That's important to me. The make or break aspect will always be there, but ... it's always been great teachers who've given me everything that I needed. I'm really looking at how to do that for other people. That's a big one. I haven't worked out what this is yet.