



## **Robert Battle leads Alvin Ailey American Dance on its new journey**

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By Hedy Weiss

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater arrives for its annual spring engagement at the Auditorium Theatre this week, marking the first time the internationally acclaimed company will appear here under its new artistic director, Robert Battle. Be prepared for two things: A continued devotion to tradition, which has been a byword of this troupe from the start, but also several big, refreshing surprises.

Battle, 40, was named to his history-laden post in the spring of 2010 — only its third leader. He knew he was stepping into some giant footprints — both those of the company's founder, and those of Judith Jamison, Ailey's longtime muse and principal dancer, who not only kept the company alive after Ailey's death in 1989, but assured its stability and oversaw its growth until her retirement in June, 2011.

The Ailey operation is a massive institution with a main company, a second company, a powerhouse school, extensive outreach programs and much, much more to oversee. Battle's appointment heralded the passing of the torch to a new generation and a new creative spirit. Transitions can be very tricky things, but Battle was an inspired choice and a crucial one. And his ascendance was handled in an exemplary way, with a yearlong transition period built into the process.

Of course the Ailey company has been an exemplary institution from the very start — back in March, 1958, when a group of African American modern dancers under Ailey's leadership gave what would become a landmark concert performance at New York's 92nd Street Y. Remember, this was well before the Civil Rights Movement gained full force, before "black is beautiful" became a popular chant, and before the spirit of African American life — as revealed by African American artists — was fully recognized as high art. Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" was only just about to be produced. There was no August Wilson yet. Nor was there a Tony Morrison.

Ailey, who had grown up in Texas, a product of both the Depression and the most virulent segregation, both seized his moment and helped shape it. His soul was forged in the Southern Baptist church as well as local jook joints, and he brought his fierce sense of black pride with him as he moved to Los Angeles, developed a passion for the arts in high school, came under the influence of dancer Carmen De Lavallade, choreographer-teacher Lester Horton (whose company he took over before ultimately formed his own in New York), and the woman who would become known as Maya Angelou. Jamison, who grew up in Philadelphia, was trained as a classical dancer, and briefly worked with American Ballet Theater before finding her true home with the Ailey company, where she was a blazing star throughout the 1960s and '70s.

Battle's roots resemble Ailey's in that he was raised in a poor neighborhood of Miami, Florida. His creative abilities also were honed in high school — at the New World School of the Arts — and subsequently at New York's Juilliard School. Upon graduation he joined the Parsons Dance Company (headed by David Parsons, a former star of the Paul Taylor Dance Company), began to choreograph for that troupe, and then founded his own company, Battleworks, in 2001. In many ways Battle is the essence of cool.

"There were really no surprises in the transition," he said during a recent chat. "I already had a vision in terms of what I wanted to do, and how I see things unfolding onstage. And in many ways it has begun to work out even better than I expected." Battle's programming for the upcoming Chicago engagement suggests some of the intriguing directions in which he is going. Over the years, the Ailey company has invariably had some of the most bravura dancers on the planet, but it has not always had the most bravura choreography. Battle is giving them some delicious challenges, drawing on work that has all sorts of subtle connections to the company's history.

For example, the troupe will perform "Arden Court," a lushly romantic and demanding work — once described as "Shakespearean" — created by Paul Taylor in 1981, and set to the music of William Boyce. It marks the first time the

Ailey company will dance a Taylor piece, and the choreographer (now 82, and still hard at work) even came to watch rehearsals and do a bit of tweaking.

“At Juilliard, I was taught by two of Taylor’s veteran principal dancers — Carolyn Adams and Linda Kent — and I felt a visceral connection to his choreography. ‘Arden Court’ was the first Taylor piece I ever saw performed, and it unlocked my understanding of him, and how he contrasts the dark and light in emotions. I also love his ‘Company B,’ with its backdrop of a soldier set against a sunny world. He has the language of a great poet in his dances, and I hope to do more of his work in the future.”

Another choreographer whose work Battle turned to was Israel’s Ohad Naharin, whose late wife, Mari Kajiwara, was a longtime principal in the Ailey company. Battle selected “Minus 16,” which has long been a signature piece for Hubbard Street Dance Chicago. And it should be fascinating to see how it looks when danced by a quite different company.

“I first saw ‘Minus 16’ at the 50th anniversary celebration for Juilliard’s dance division and it left an incredible impression on me,” Battle recalled. “I loved all its unexpected elements, the way the dancers were dressed, and the chair section [in which a large group of dancers, seated in a semi-circle, erupt in a cyclical, repetitive way, gradually shedding their clothes]. I think that section is a wonderful metaphor for the Ailey company and for modern dance in general —the stripping down of the person stuck in bondage. And I think it speaks to all those in a land of immigrants.”

The Ailey dancers were coached in Naharin’s free-body “gaga” style and learned the Hebrew song at the work’s center. Noting the work’s power, and also its potential for stirring up controversy, what intrigued him most was the section in which members of the audience are brought up onstage by the dancers.

“This was where I thought we could really play with the history of the Ailey company in a way that has never happened,” Battle said. “We could not only reach out from the proscenium, but let people out there touch the spectacle in a sort of real life 3D way. The electricity in the audience keeps building as the audience members are escorted up to the stage, and it’s a spiritual moment. As Mr. Ailey always said, ‘I believe that the dance came from the people and that it should always be delivered back to the people’. At a recent performance a woman lost her wig onstage, and when the dancer who was her partner whispered ‘I’m so sorry’ she said, ‘I’m 70 years old and having the time of my life’.”

The new work on view will be “Home,” by hip-hop choreographer Rennie Harris. Set to gospel house music, it was inspired by stories submitted to the “Fight HIV Your Way” contest of people living with or affected by HIV. It debuted in New York on Dec. 1, 2011, marking both World AIDS DAY and the 22nd anniversary of Ailey’s death from the disease.

Battle, “the choreographer,” also will be represented during the engagement with his tour de force, whimsical male solo, “Takademe,” set to the rhythms of Indian kathak dance as heard in Sheila Chandra’s jazzy score. It has been performed here several times as part of the summertime Chicago Dancing Festival (as has his thrilling male ritual dance, “The Hunt”). Chicago audiences might also know Battle by way of “Train,” a favorite in River North Dance Chicago’s repertoire. Of course Ailey’s work will be on view, as well, with “Memoria,” his tribute to his friend, the late choreographer Joyce Trisler, set to the music of Keith Jarrett, and his masterwork, “Revelations,” which audiences still clamor to see.

“People literally set their clocks to that piece,” said Battle.