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Alvin Ailey's Battle looking for connections and surprises

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By Sid Smith

"What I've sought to do, for my first season, was not just bring in things that are new to the company for the sake of being new," Robert Battle, now in his first full season as artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, said. "But things to which I feel some sort of connection."

One result is that the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater annual engagement April 11-15 at the Auditorium Theatre will boast some mild surprises. Probably biggest among them is "Arden Court," the first Ailey mounting of a work by Paul Taylor, the modern dance giant and contemporary of Ailey himself.



Both Taylor, still going at 81, and Ailey, who died in 1989, born less than a year apart, are pioneers who brought different aspects of inclusion to the art. Their individual styles, their company looks, are distinct, Taylor more airy and light, Ailey fond of strong, muscular dancers and lyrical, dramatic movement. To "Arden Court," the Ailey troupe no doubt brings its own distinct stamp to an established classic--a potentially fascinating confluence.

"One aspect of 'Arden Court' that really strikes me is the adagio section for men," Battle said of the 1981 classic. "It's not what you traditionally associate with the image of male dancers, of hunters or gatherers, but a section about stillness and shifting weight. It's very subtle and shows off the men in a different and beautiful way."

Battle hit on the idea of acquiring the work and contacted Taylor, who readily agreed. The subject of Taylor and Ailey's friendship naturally came up. "They started their companies around the same time, they struggled at the same time, without a lot of money, and Paul told me he greatly admired what Alvin achieved," Battle said. "They were friendly, though they didn't hang out. Of course, they didn't have a lot of free time."

Battle's connections to Taylor are multiple, including time spent as a performer with the Parsons Dance Company, run by former Taylor dancer David Parsons, and study with some other important key Taylor acolytes.

Meanwhile, Ohad Naharin's "Minus 16" is another exciting choice, familiar to Chicagoans, thanks to its long popularity at Hubbard Street Dance Chicago. It is a tour de force spectacle with some traditional Jewish imagery, a tantalizing choice on a bill that also includes Ailey's own gospel great, "Revelations." Its improvisational finale, bringing audience members up onto the stage, offers what Battle believes is a kind of catharsis for longtime fans.

"This company is noted as historical, which can be a daunting term, unless you use that history to make the performance come alive in a new way," Battle said. "There's a saying around here that Mr. Ailey's art came from the people and should always go back to them. Audiences are used to seeing the company on a proscenium stage, removed from their presence. So when we break that fourth wall and journey out among them, in 'Minus 16,' for those who've seen us over and over, it's truly a surprise, full of this unexpected energy. It's like a happening."