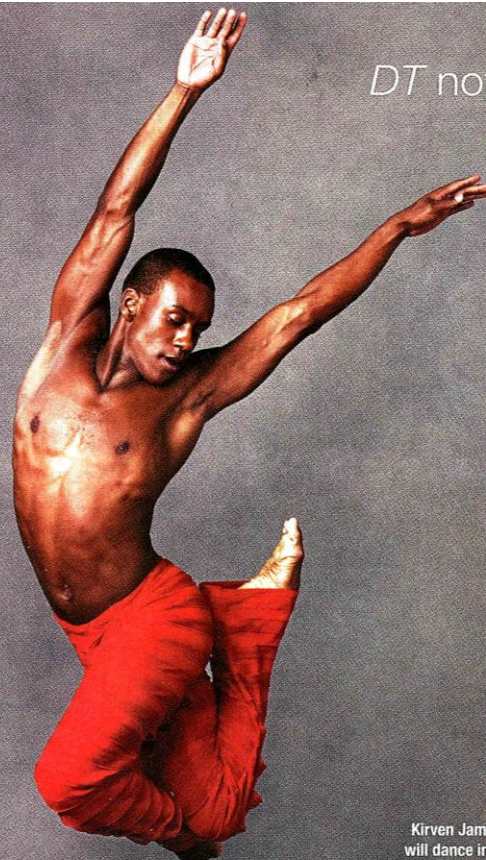


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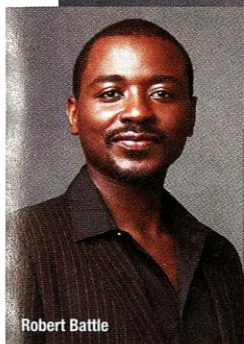
New Year, New Director, New Work

Ailey begins a new season, led by Robert Battle, remembering the company's founder with a hip-hop piece for World AIDS Day.

BY KRISTIN SCHWAB



Kirven James Boyd will dance in Rennie Harris' *Home*.



Robert Battle

This year's opening bill of **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's** New York City Center season honors several milestones. On December 1, the company recognizes World AIDS Day and remembers the 22-year anniversary of founder Alvin Ailey's death from the

disease, and it begins its first season with new artistic director Robert Battle.

To commemorate, AAADT premieres a new work by hip-hop choreographer Rennie Harris, founder of Rennie Harris Puremovement and winner of three Bessie Awards, the Pew Charitable Trust Choreographer Initiative Fellowship, the Herb Albert Award for Choreography and a United States Artists Fellowship. Harris' piece *Home*, set on 14 dancers to a gospel house music score, finds its inspiration from the stories, photos and poems of 10 people living with or affected by AIDS. These real-life experiences were submitted through the "Fight HIV Your Way" contest presented by Bristol-Myers Squibb (a biopharmaceutical company). Over 1,300 entries were narrowed down to the final 10 by a panel that included Ailey's artistic director emerita Judith Jamison.

"A lot of people didn't know that he [Ailey] had an AIDS-related illness. We had to keep a lid on it in respect for his family, who didn't want people to know," says Jamison. "So the fact that in 2011 we can say, 'Yes! We're doing a piece for those living with HIV,' is a wonderful feeling."

Harris, who began working on the project in mid-September,

feels that his voice will be a unique start to the company's 2011-12 season. "Audiences haven't seen Ailey move this way before," he says. "The work opens them up to a whole new perspective." With undulating, turned, suddenly sharp spines over grounded feet, *Home* uses the footwork-based dance called "house style," which falls under the street-dance umbrella. Harris describes house as "neo-jazz" and believes that the movement vocabulary will challenge the dancers. "It's double the difficulty—they're trying to pick up a new genre of dance, plus my own spin on its style," he says.

"Harris' style is unique in terms of our repertory, but it comes out of the traditions of African and social dance," adds Battle. "This work honors the roots of the company." Before a recent rehearsal, he also noted that like Ailey's *Revelations*, *Home* is a creative work inspired by a social movement.

Harris and Battle first worked together in 2004, when the pair were asked to create separate sections of *Love Stories*, a collaboration initiated by Jamison for AAADT. "This time, I get to work with Robert in a whole new way," says Harris. "There's more of a conversation about the work—we're constantly going back and forth."

Harris wants to remind audiences that his piece, which will tour during the rest of Ailey's season, is not a direct translation of the 10 experiences, but inspired by them. "I'm not transforming these poems and stories," he says. "The work is about celebrating life—a conversation between God and the individual." **DT**