

EBONY

April 6, 2011

ROBERT BATTLE INTERVIEW

By Sergio Mims

The Passing of the Torch at the Alvin Ailey Dance Company



Renowned choreographer Robert Battle made news when it was announced last spring that he would succeed Judith Jamison as the new artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in July 2011. Founded in 1958 by legendary pioneering choreographer Alvin Ailey, the company is without question one of the most innovative and acclaimed dance companies in the world. Both the main dance company and Ailey II are currently on their North American and U.K. tours, with the main company making its final stop this season in Chicago in May.

Miami native and Julliard dance graduate Battle, who will be only the third artistic director in the organization's history, is in his own right an extraordinary choreographer whose association with the Ailey goes back to 1999. He has created numerous works for the company and for other world-renowned dance companies; he was previously a member of the Parson Dance Company; and he founded and ran his own dance company, Battleworks. A documentary about the Ailey company in which Battle is featured, *Beyond the Steps*, will premiere on the Documentary Channel cable channel on April 26.

We recently had a chance to talk with the very busy Battle about his new role, what dance means to him and what makes an Alvin Ailey dancer unlike any other in the world.

EBONY: You're only the third artistic director of the Alvin Ailey dance company, after Ailey himself and Judith Jamison. I suppose you must be excited and somewhat apprehensive about the responsibility of running a great and legendary American historical and cultural institution such as this.

BATTLE: Yeah, I think that's fair. There's definitely a mixture, but not a mixture that I'm not familiar with in the general sense [laughs]. Just being a dance maker for a living is a little bit like that. There's definitely the fear of not wanting to mess up and knowing that doing well there, there will be times when one does ... [laughs] miscalculate. In some ways there have been strains, but I'm glad that I feel that way. Not only because it is a familiar feeling in terms of being a performer, but because I think it means so much.

I think that the wonderful thing in my circumstances, coming into this rich legacy, is that Ms. Jamison is still here. She chose me, and she is here to help in whatever way she can to guide me through this new beginning. It's been really comforting to have that kind of mentorship. And because I believe in her and I'm so awed by what she has done for 20-something years with this organization and what she has done in a lifetime of her own work. To have somebody like that right next to you [saying,] "You can do it!" is very much reassuring.

EBONY: Of course, you had had a long association with the Ailey company, creating works for it, and perhaps will sound presumptuous, but why do you feel you were picked to run the company? What was it that Ms. Jamison and others saw in you to lead them into the future?

BATTLE: You're asking me, not them, but having said that, I think they saw a connection, a kindred spirit, if you will, with the founder, Mr. Ailey, and the notion that it wasn't just about good choreography, but it was about seeing a whole vision. And it was about the desire to see others have a platform in which they could express themselves. That was more important, I believe, to Mr. Ailey, than just making dances. There was generosity of spirit that I think I connect with, and I

think I am looking at it in that kind of holistic way rather than, "OK, now how many works can I create?" That wasn't the bigger part of why I was chosen. I think I was able to articulate a broader sense of how I see my role and that is to nurture and foster new and innovative voices that will be our future. And that is key with the school, the Ailey extension classes, the camp, Ailey II and, of course, the main company.

EBONY: Let me go back to a basic question: What is it about dance that makes it your life and existence? In the documentary, one of the Ailey dancers, Dwana Adiaha Smallwood, says this great line: "Dance was the thing I could recognize myself in. Even before I could articulate it verbally, I found a voice. I found a place to belong." Is that how you feel as well?

BATTLE: Absolutely! Dance is our mother tongue in a way. Movement, in my opinion, came first. Some say the voice came first, but you have to open your mouth. Movement, to me, is something that connects us to our past, our present and it celebrates our future because when you're moving, you know you're alive in some way or another. So I think that it's always been like that for me.

In fact, I could further say that as a young person, I grew up in household with singing and music. My mother played piano in the church choir. I learned to play piano at a very early age because I had a gift to understand music, and I sang in the church choir as well. But being a shy and nervous child, when I found dance, I felt it was the one thing through which I was able to overcome that. Plus, for me, I think it was more profound because I was born bowlegged and I had to have braces to straighten out my legs when I was very young, so once I started moving, I never stopped.

EBONY: I've read that back when you were 12 or so, you first saw the Ailey dancers perform and that had an enormous impact on you. Who would have guessed that all these years later you would be running the company?

BATTLE: [Laughs] Of course, as you can imagine, over the past many months I've been really examining that "point of contact" as I call it, that movement of impact. I was bused with a group to the theater from Liberty City in Miami to the Jackie Gleason Performing Arts Center, with some of us feeling at home, some of us feeling somewhat out of our element and sitting down and watching "Revelations." And the feeling I remember most is that I got it.

And that may sound simplistic, but I think for a young person it's really a crucial moment when you really see and experience something and you feel that you owned it; no one had to explain it to you. I saw a reflection of myself—everything I was told about my culture, my history, growing up in the church, my great uncle who helped raise me who was born in 1903 and his past and some of his stories about growing up in this country. I saw it all in Revelations. And it stayed with me. It left an indelible impression which inspired me and took me from there to now being here.

EBONY: One thing I've noticed about Alvin Ailey dancers is that no matter what type of work they do, no matter the complexity or physicality of the work, there's always a genuine sense of grace. Do you agree?

BATTLE: Yes, and to go further, there is the humanity in what they do. They don't hide behind movement. Mr. Ailey said once, I "In my works, I want the person to show [himself or herself] through my movement, to show me what is strange and beautiful about them through my movement." I know that's been a very important aspect in choosing a dancer for the company, that you see some sense of their humanity.

So I think we really look for that in the dancers—can they connect to the audience, not just through dazzling with their physicality, which is wonderful and, for some people, is enough, but also, do they make a connection? And we look for those dancers who not only can do the steps, but you feel that you really know that person after they're finished doing a work. That is really unique.

EBONY: Oh yes, one last question for my own benefit: Can anyone be taught to dance?

BATTLE: [Laughs] I say yes! You can move something!