

FORTUNE

Beyond the Boardroom: Conversations with leaders who transcend traditional business

How Alvin Ailey keeps dancing

Artistic director Robert Battle describes the challenges and payoff of keeping his modern dance company fresh and relevant.

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FORTUNE -- In 1958, in the midst of the civil rights movement, a young African American man originally from Texas formed a multi-racial modern dance troupe, a daring move. The group first performed in New York City at what was then called the 92nd Street Young Men's Hebrew Association (now the 92nd Street Y).

That company, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, has since become a major force in American arts. In 2008, Congress named it a "cultural ambassador to the world."

So the pressure is on Robert Battle, who took the helm as artistic director of the company in July 2011. He speaks with Fortune about the challenges and the payoff of keeping a modern dance company modern.



PHOTO: PAUL KOLNIK/ALVIN AILEY DANCE THEATER

Fortune: How did you first get into dance?

Robert Battle: I was born, completely bow-legged. I always say that because of the irony of being in dance in such a big way. When I was about five years old, I got braces and straightened my legs out.

About that time, I moved with my family to Miami to live with my cousins because my great aunt and uncle raised me and my great aunt had a stroke. My cousin, who's still the one I call mother, was into the arts. I started imitating her on the piano, and they realized I had an ear for music.

You know those kids with a high voice until they are 14? I was that child. My voice changed around Michael Jackson time -- everybody was imitating Michael Jackson in the 80s, and that got me more interested in dance. I auditioned for dance in my high school and I got in. I loved it. Dance was the one discipline where I felt comfortable.

What was your first experience with the Alvin Ailey dance company?

I saw Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* when it came to Miami. I just fell in love with that work. It was like, Christmas for a young person, do you know what I mean? When your eyes are wide open and everything was unbelievable. That got me more into dance, more serious about it.

What would you say makes the Alvin Ailey company unique?

When Mr. Ailey started the company in 1958, during the time of the civil rights movement, he was this young African American stepping out on a wing and a prayer because he felt he had something to say about his people and about his culture in a country that didn't always value either of those things. He created such a positive message out of a sometimes very negative environment where we weren't allowed to take certain ballet classes over here, or be in the same hotel over there. Sometimes when the company traveled, they were integrating the hotels where they stayed for the first time.

You think about Mr. Ailey stepping out on that precipice and you look at the company now: we're sitting in this wonderful center for dance and we've been named by Congress as cultural ambassadors to the world, all because of the vision of this young black man. It's incredible.

What is the message of the company?

Mr. Ailey said it so well: "Dance comes from the people and should always be delivered back to the people." He wanted people to be in awe of what these dancers are able to do, but he wanted them to see reflections of themselves on stage.

That message comes across in dance because performers use their bodies and everybody has a body, so there is that connection. Even though these bodies are pretty spectacular.

I wish I had the body of an Alvin Ailey dancer.

Right, me too. There's nothing wrong with that.

How do you carry on such a rich tradition?

Be true to yourself and your convictions, because that speaks to the time you're in and to the future. When I'm teaching dancers, I have them do the simplest gesture with their arms, and I say, "You have to own that, no one will do that gesture exactly the way you do."

So if my gesture is being a leader and presenting what I see as the truth to the world through these dancers and through my choice of repertory and through my own choreography, even if I'm criticized, I have to stand in the belief in my own convictions. I find that that is the greatest challenge, but the greatest reward too.

What are other challenges?

As a choreographer, I'm very in tune with body language; I'm in tune with how people feel. I don't believe you can be an effective leader if you don't have that kind of sensitivity. But that sensitivity can sometimes get in the way of hard decisions. So you do have to find within yourself the distance to make decisions that are for the greater good of the company.

As artists, we wear our hearts on our sleeves. In that way, it isn't a corporation. We are asking the dancers to be vulnerable on stage. So in asking all that, we're very sensitive to how they feel.

And you have to turn plenty of people down who want to be in the company.

Yeah. Somebody's going to be rejected, we agree on that when they come through the door. Dancers are sort of used to that, they have to be.

Any advice on how to survive an audition?

You have to go ahead and know you might get cut, then you can express your love of movement and the strong desire you have to communicate that to an audience. You still may not get in, but you'll have a better time.