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New artistic director brings new directions for Alvin Ailey

By SUSAN BROILI

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Robert Battle did not sound as though he had the weight of a dance legacy on his shoulders. Instead, in a recent telephone interview, he seemed energized and excited about his new role as artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

The company performs two different programs Monday and Tuesday at UNC's Memorial Auditorium.

As the company's third artistic director since Ailey founded the company in 1958, Battle's mission encompasses not only honoring the legacies of the past but also moving forward. He finds a big vote of confidence in the fact that Judith Jamison, who served as the company's second artistic director for 21 years, chose him as the next leader. "She feels I'm the right person to take the company into the future," Battle said. "This is a calling for me. There was no other choice but to step into this role."

This trumped the sadness he had felt about disbanding BattleWorks, the company he started in 2001. "We were like a small family ... We all inspired each other and that inspiration continues," Battle, 39, said.

Since he knows first-hand the importance of mentors on the lives of dancers and choreographers, Battle wants the Ailey dancers to benefit from such mentorships. He's had many mentors, including former Paul Taylor dancer Carolyn Adams, and counts Jamison as his most recent. Jamison encouraged him to remember "that your singular voice is most important and to trust your instinct," he said. He feels fortunate to have spent a year with Jamison at the Ailey company prior to taking over as artistic director in July 2011, Battle said. Still, he was no stranger to the company, having created works for dancers there over the years.

Since he assumed directorship, he has initiated the New Directions choreography labs that match choreographers with such mentors as Gus Solomons Jr. and Carmen deLavallade.

Giving the company an opportunity to learn and perform work by a variety of choreographers also serves as a way to mentor, he added. This season, for the first time ever, the company performs a work by Paul Taylor ("Arden Court," 1981) and one by Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin ("Minus 16," 1999).

These two choreographers represent a double-pronged approach to perform work by such American masters as Taylor as well as explore work by international choreographers. After all, the company is based in the United States and also performs abroad as the Congress-designated Cultural Ambassadors to the World, Battle pointed out.

Performing work by new-to-them choreographers also challenges and stretches the dancers in a number of ways. For instance, in preparation for learning Naharin's "Minus 16," dancers took classes in "gaga," Naharin's method of encouraging dancers to shed habitual movements and go deeper to explore their own unique instincts. "It's a whole different way of moving," Battle said. "Minus 16" begins with one dancer's improvisation, which serves to draw the audience in. Eventually, some audience members are brought onstage to perform with the company, he added. "Afterwards, they (audience members) were signing autographs," Battle said.

"One of our trademarks we're sometimes criticized for is that we are accessible. I think that's a good thing," Battle said. Audiences can be both entertained and educated, he added.

He believes such works as Naharin's serve to expand the audience's experience. "'Minus 16' is an innovative, different experience," Battle said. "The whole point of modern dance is to shake things up a bit."

The Naharin work appears on the company's Tuesday program here that also includes Battle's 1995 "Takedeme," inspired

by Indian kathak dance.

In addition to Taylor's "Arden Court," the Monday program includes "Home," hip-hop choreographer Rennie Harris's new dance for the company set to gospel music and inspired by stories of people affected by HIV. Battle's connection to Taylor's work goes back to his days at The Juilliard School when he studied with former Taylor dancers Carolyn Adams and Linda Kent (also performed with the Ailey company.) At Juilliard, Battle danced in Taylor's "Esplanade."

Both Taylor and Naharin represent a lineage of modern dance since both danced with Martha Graham, Battle said. "I'm a dance history buff. I love looking back at what got us to this place," he added.

Both programs on this current tour end with honoring that past, specifically Ailey's classic 1960 "Revelations," a testament to the persistence of the human spirit.