

(Shawn Carter / Jay-Z Blog)

The Dawn of a New Day for Alvin Ailey Company

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By Steven Psyllos

Simply put, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Company has been at the forefront of modern dance for five decades. Even after Ailey himself died in 1989, his appointed Artistic Director Judith Jamison pushed the company's message worldwide and to a new generation of dance enthusiasts. In 2010, after 21 years of bringing some much-needed soul to the artform, Jamison passed the baton on to esteemed choreographer, Robert Battle. Battle's first season as Artistic Director launches with the company's annual stint at New York's City Center, in which he'll present heritage works such as "Revelations" as well as injecting some new flavor by commissioning works of stellar contemporaries.



One collaborator is hip-hop whiz Rennie Harris, whose work "Home" reflects on those affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic today. The work was first presented on World AIDS Day (December 1) in honor of Ailey. Here, Life + Times talks new chapters with the man-with-a-plan, Robert Battle; the artist who has the Company dancing to house music, Rennie Harris; and the youngest dancer of the crew and Company newbie, Belen Estrada.



Life+Times: What were your intentions with this first season? Were you looking to create a new energy in the dance, explore new directions?

Robert Battle: My intention was to celebrate all that the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is — past, future and present. I want to honor the past and continue to exam how we got to where we are, while also remaining in the present with choreographers like Rennie Harris, hip-hop, HIV/AIDS and other social and political issues of today. We are also looking towards the future with other choreographers and people with new and exciting ways to express both new and old ideas. I want to continue to keep audiences on that precipice with us.

L+T: How do you form relationships with the dancers? How did you get them to trust you and your vision?

Battle: Simply put, it has to do with the audition process. You look for people that you connect with. Not only are these the most talented dancers in the world, but they are people who want to say something through movement and not just be decorative. I identify with that — so I identify with them because of that. But I think it's also because they know the importance of this Company that's been around for over 50 years. They know that this Company means so much to this country and the world. We are cultural ambassadors for our country — what could be more important than that? So I think they are on this journey with me.

L+T: How would you describe the tone of “Home?”

Rennie Harris (pictured right): Sort of like the feeling you get when being away for a long time and returning home — at peace in every way. It’s a bittersweet acknowledgement of life. I have combined the stories of those that have been directly impacted by HIV to build the sense of cultures colliding in a club. In my time in New York, the club was a place for all, where people came to enjoy and some came to live — and the rhythm was the actual culture of those people.



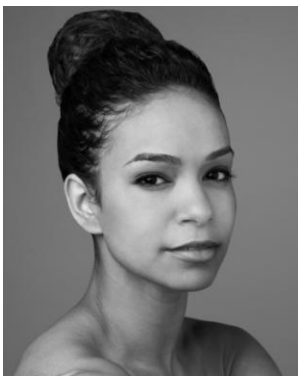
L+T: Were you excited to see the Ailey group spread their wings and dance like they were at a downtown club?

Harris: It was great to get the dancers involved in the movement. I always start with movement and then interject meaning into my pieces, allowing the dancers to build their own characters throughout the piece. There is also a sense of getting to know the dancers throughout the process and incorporating their own individual talents in the piece.

L+T: How does it feel to join the company at such a pivotal moment in its history?

Belen Estrada: Not only am I honored to be a part of the Alvin Ailey family, but being a part of this new era with its new Director is a dream come true! It feels like this is all meant to be. It makes me extremely excited and charged with joy to know that as the Company continues to evolve in a new direction, I will be growing with it!

L+T: How would you describe Robert Battle’s style?



Estrada: It’s hard to put it into words, but from working with him for these last few months all I can really say is his choreography really connects you to the music. From the time you begin to dance until you finish, Robert’s choreography feels so liberating and so good that you get lost in that moment and you remember why you love dancing so much.

L+T: What was the most fun you’ve shared with your new company?

Estrada: One of my favorite things to do is to stand in the wings and watch “The Hunt” by Robert Battle! Everyone joins in backstage and we clap along and encourage the men who are on stage. That’s when I have fun!