

Robert Battle talks of next steps for Ailey dance troupe

The 37-year choreographer, named last week to take over for longtime Ailey artistic director Judith Jamison in July 2011, promises 'some surprises' for audiences.

Robert Battle, the new artistic director designate for the Alvin Ailey School. (Jennifer S. Altman, For The Times / May 3, 2010)



May 3, 2010

NEW YORK — It was only a little more than 48 hours since Robert Battle had learned he would be the new artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, but he was getting used to saying "we" as he discussed the organization whose reins he would officially take over in July 2011.

The announcement was eagerly awaited in the dance world, since the 51-year-old company has one of the busiest, most high-profile schedules in the dance world, and longtime director Judith Jamison had announced her impending departure two years ago, allowing plenty of time for a careful search.

The choice of Battle — a 37-year-old modern-dance choreographer who has directed his own small company, Battleworks, since 2002, while creating several works for the Ailey troupe (and its junior ensemble, Ailey II) — struck some as surprising, yet also seemed logical.

He is not an Ailey insider, but he is by no means a complete outsider. His association with the Ailey organization — which includes several stints as an artist in residence at the school that is one of its major components — goes back more than a decade. He created a *pièce d'occasion* for the company's all-important gala opening night for its most recent New York season, intended as a salute to Jamison on her 20th anniversary as director.

He comes from a solid modern-dance background, having graduated from Juilliard's dance program and danced with David Parsons' company for seven years before focusing on his own choreography. He is thoughtful and well-spoken, with a broad interest in, and appreciation for, a wide range of dance, and he often can be spotted in attendance at the city's major dance venues.

Battle's new role, which will follow a yearlong transition period working alongside Jamison, represents a major transition for the Ailey troupe, which has had only two leaders — both charismatic and influential — in its history.

Jamison, after 15 years as Ailey's muse and the company's leading dancer, became artistic director shortly after Ailey died in 1989. Her personal and artistic connection with Ailey has made her an eloquent champion of the inclusive, humanitarian approach at the heart of Ailey's mission, even as she has expanded the repertory and cultivated an ensemble of exceptionally talented dancers.

"It was a very interesting choice. They could have gone with a much safer choice, and I think that says a lot about the company," said Arlene Shuler, president and chief executive of City Center, where the Ailey troupe has its annual five-week New York season. "I think he's looking at a broader spectrum of artists to work with the company. And that always makes dancers grow."

In a conference room of the sleekly elegant Ailey building at 9th Avenue and 55th Street, Battle said, "There is so much that this organization has done right from the get-go."

Despite the whirlwind of activity that followed Thursday's announcement — Battle had just addressed the school's students — he looked dapper and unflappable in a black turtleneck and dark pinstriped jacket and spoke with measured thoughtfulness and reflection.

"Mr. Ailey was generous enough to have the vision to see that this needed to be a repertory company, because that way, it is always rooted in the past, present and future. It's built into the model," Battle said. "I think those things did give me a road map as to how I'm going to lead — always keeping my eye on those three things. But also, there are always new voices being born, a different generation. I think we're continuing to knock down walls and to express the versatility of these great dancers."

As a young dance student, the Miami native attended the New World School of the Arts and discovered the Ailey company through videotapes. "I will never forget the indelible imprint that seeing the company live for the first time left on my imagination," he said.

Discovering "Revelations," the touchstone 1960 Ailey work that is a repertory mainstay, ignited something in the young aspiring dancer. "Seeing 'Revelations' tied it all together; I had been taking dance classes, but I think nothing had really shown 'How does this relate to me?' And 'Revelations' did that, on a personal level. I come from parts of that experience — my mother played piano for the church choir."

The Ailey repertory has not always won favor with critics even while they showered the dancers with praise, Battle said. "When I look at this company, it keeps the audience first. And the audiences keep coming. I think that's important. Not everybody in that audience likes everything they see; the majority do.

"The rep is so varied; I think some of the works are just brilliant. They go from entertaining to something a lot more deep," he said. "I think there's a rich tapestry of work, and sometimes the company doesn't get enough credit for that. I believe there's a little bit for everybody, and I would continue that.

"As the leader, you have to choose the work that speaks to you and that you believe in, that you feel motivated by and that you have strong feelings about. Again, there's risk in that, and you can believe that there are choices that are going to be controversial when you do that," Battle continued. "Otherwise, you're not a leader; you spend too much time trying to consider too many opinions.

"I have an eclectic taste. I'm really interested in having some surprises for audiences — to see the dancers in new ways, because they're so versatile," he said. "I will be looking at home and abroad, trying to bring things that really create new conversations around the marvel of these dancers."

Speaking of Jamison, he said, "I'm so happy that she will still be here, because there's much to learn from her. There are so many parts to this — so many tours, so many countries and cities that have their own relationship to the Ailey company. These things are important for me to know. So that's going to be a big part of the orientation."

calendar@latimes.com

Copyright © 2010, The Los Angeles Times