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## Miamian Robert Battle steps into big shoes as Ailey director

BY JORDAN LEVIN

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RICHARD PATTERSON / FILE PHOTO

December 19, 2002- Choreographer Robert Battle visits and teaches at the New World School the Arts in downtown Miami.

To go from staging Michael Jackson videos in his backyard in Liberty City to heading America's most successful modern dance company is an almost incomprehensibly huge leap. And yet Robert Battle, the 37-year-old Miami-raised choreographer who was named artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Company late last week, can still connect the awe he felt as an aspiring 14-year-old dancer watching the Ailey troupe perform with the excitement at getting one of the most influential jobs in the dance world.

“To fast forward from that person just learning to plié to this person now is awesome, but in a way it feels like no time has passed,” said Battle from his New York apartment. “When I was told the news that I got the job, I felt like that child again, that speechless

innocent. And I'm just so profoundly grateful.”

Battle's new job provides reason for both gratitude and trepidation. He will succeed Judith Jamison, a former star dancer with the troupe who has led it to immense success in her 20 years as artistic director. She is the only person to run the troupe since founder Alvin Ailey died in 1989. When Battle takes over full-time in July 2011 (he and Jamison will work together until then), he will be responsible for a major cultural institution. The Ailey company, housed in a state-of-the-art building in Manhattan, has a \$26 million budget and runs a junior troupe, a school and outreach programs around the United States. The enormously popular main company tours nationally and internationally every year (it performs at the Adrienne Arsht Center on May 20-23).

### SINGLE MOM

Ailey grew up poor with a single mother, and overcame prejudice to create his troupe, which has come to symbolize both African-American and human achievement. “If I wasn't nervous I'd be a little concerned, because the implications are so huge,” Battle said. “This company is a huge part of American history, not just African-American history. As an artist, nothing can be greater than that responsibility. So I'm nervous, but I also feel . . . that everything in my life has led me to this point.” Jamison said she believes in her successor. “In seeking a new leader for the company, it was important to find someone who has his own vision,” she said. “[Battle] has a world view and is capable of taking this company in new directions.”

A destiny as head of a legendary dance company was probably not apparent when Battle's great aunt and uncle, Anna and Willie Horne, took their neglected, bow-legged grand-nephew away from his mother, Maria Battle, getting braces to correct his legs and then sending him to live with their daughter Dessie Horne in Liberty City. A high school English teacher who inculcated a love of the arts in the cousin who called her Mom, Horne said she is astonished and admiring at how her charge had grown up. “I've been getting calls all day like I'm the one who did the deed, when I'm just the one who said 'go head, go head,' ” Horne said Thursday. “I believed in his talent. It is amazing. But everything always came to him so easy.”

Although Battle showed musical talent early, learning to play the piano, he proved even more talented in dance, studying at PAVAC, an arts magnet program at Northwestern High School, and then

attending New World School of the Arts in 11th and 12th grade, graduating in 1990. He went on to attend New York's prestigious Juilliard School, graduating in 1994 and went directly into the David Parsons Company, a popular modern dance troupe. In 2001, he left to form his own group, Battleworks. Over the past decade he formed a strong relationship with the Ailey company, choreographing a number of pieces for both the main and junior troupes and serving as artist-in-residence at the Ailey school.

### **LOT OF LAYERS**

Gerri Houlihan, a former dance teacher at New World who mentored Battle and has remained close to him, sees a connection between her former student and Ailey. Both overcame adversity that gave them depth under a charismatic exterior. "Because of the way Robert grew up and all those experiences, there are a lot of layers to him," Houlihan said. "He's very entertaining and smart on his feet, but underneath there's a lot going on."

For his part, Battle is thinking about how to fuse his own history with the Ailey company, to bring them both into the future. "I'm feeling very reflective about my roots and all the teachers I've had along the way," he said. "What interests me is [Ailey] is a company that, much like the nature of dance, is rooted in the past, the present and the future."

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