

Battle Station

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By David Paul Appell



Robert Battle; Photography by Gregg Delmar

Liberty City isn't exactly known to be a hotbed of fine arts. That's why it's all the more impressive that this July, a 38-year-old grad of Miami Northwestern Senior High School will become director of the legendary Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater—only the third director this powerhouse of modern dance has ever had in its 53-year history. Gazing out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the company's light-drenched headquarters in Manhattan, Robert Battle says, "It still doesn't seem real to me. I feel humbled."

We'd heard the guy was unpretentious (and really, how common is *that* in the arts?), but watching him interact with staff and students, one gets a sense of how genuinely friendly and egalitarian their rapport is. And yet, there's grit and steel beneath that easygoing exterior, going way back to childhood.

At the age of 14, after starting life underweight and bowlegged (a condition later corrected by leg braces), Battle found himself at Ailey's signature show, *Revelations*, at the Jackie Gleason Theater in the early '90s. That performance was so influential to Battle that the company became his life's touchstone.

The people from his old neighborhood who knew him best are not surprised to see where he's ended up. One of those is Dessie Williams, a now retired English teacher who, together with her own father, largely raised the dancer. Life circumstances had pushed Battle's birth mother out of the picture early on. "He was always twirling around," Williams says of Battle. "I would say to him, 'Why don't you sit *down!*'"

But she also says she knew that someday her little one was going to become "the dance boss." Naturally, in a tough neighborhood and culture where hip-hop and basketball were considered far cooler tickets to advancement, a twirling lad far more interested in modern dance was bound to get a certain amount of ribbing. But that wasn't enough to deter Battle. "He learned karate," says Williams. "And he was very self-motivated and strong in his mind."

Not to mention talented. Battle went on to attend Miami's New World School of the Arts, then won a Princess Grace Foundation Scholarship to Juilliard. After graduation, he performed with the New York-based Parsons Dance Company, founded his own company called Battleworks, and in 1999 was asked by Ailey Director Judith Jamison to choreograph. It was the start of an association that grew into such a close relationship that Battle eventually came to be seen as Jamison's natural successor.

Battle says his plan is to deepen and strengthen the work that Ailey has already been doing, in particular expanding dance camps (like the one at the Adrienne Arsht Center this June 27 to Aug. 6) as well as improve mentorship opportunities. More than a few Miamians are looking forward to 2012 (Feb. 21-23), when the Ailey company will perform again at the Arsht—for the first time under the leadership of a native son.