



A Homecoming For Alvin Ailey's Artistic Director

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By Jordan Levin

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The renowned Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is currently on a national tour, and the company has brought Robert Battle, its new artistic director, back to where he started — a public school in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Miami.

When Battle attended Northwestern Senior High in the mid-'80s, he'd walk 16 blocks to school through some of Liberty City's roughest neighborhoods. The riot-scarred area was still wracked by drugs, crime and desolation. So the former boy soprano carried some protection under his dance tights and ballet slippers.

"I went to putting a hammer in my bag," says Battle, "because I was nervous about being picked on. And it gave me a certain confidence that I could be tough when I needed to be."

Today, as he walks into Northwestern, the only weight Battle carries is his position as artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Northwestern is mostly known in Miami for its championship football team. But it's had an arts program since the early '70s, and Battle started dancing here in the ninth grade. He went on to top conservatories in Miami and New York, became a choreographer and started his own company.



Robert Battle grew up in Miami and began dancing as a ninth-grader. He became artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in July. *Andrew Eccles/Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater*

Battle choreographed many works for the Ailey troupe before he was named artistic director in July 2011.

"You know, this is where I started," Battle tells Northwestern's newest crop of young dancers during his recent homecoming. "And I haven't been back in over 27 years. So this is like a full-circle moment."

The students have been studying *Revelations*, choreographer Alvin Ailey's beloved gospel music masterpiece. Twenty-four of them are waiting for Battle in a small studio, trembling in their black leotards. When he gets there, they show him a yearning dance from *Revelations*.

Afterward, Battle talks about the *weight* behind the steps. "You're holding that heavy burden," he tells the dancers. "So from that first moment when you lift that arm, there's that heaviness, which is such a tradition in modern dance — the idea that we all have very weighty issues."

Battle had his own issues growing up here. He was a shy kid who loved music and was embarrassed to wear tights. An older cousin raised him, and he only



Yannick Lebrun performs choreography from Robert Battle's *Takademe*. *Takademe* is near and dear to me as one of my first creations," says Battle, artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. "It's a work I made in the tiny living room of my old apartment in Queens." *Andrew Eccles/Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater*

met his birth mother twice. He did dance exercises at night, using the iron security bars on the window for a ballet barre.

It was a Northwestern teacher named Ms. Munez who got Battle to believe in himself. Munez would go to Battle's 55th Street home on holidays and summon him to work on his routines. "She would come wake me up, bring me to this school — she had a key — and she would give me a private class," says Battle. "I owe a lot to people like that."

Desiree Johnson, whose daughter LaShaye currently studies dance at Northwestern, took dance alongside Battle in high school. Johnson says it was a thrill to meet Battle again after all these years. Her daughter was also inspired by Battle's story.

"[He] makes me feel like anything is possible because he was an inner-city child just like me," LaShaye says. "I could go further just like he has."



Members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater perform *Revelations*, a piece set to gospel spirituals that Ailey choreographed when he was 29. *Andrew Eccles/Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater*

But senior Jacquez Hunter sounds like he could use some of the same encouragement Battle received. "I feel like I have to be flawless sometimes, and I know I have a million-and-1,500 flaws," he says. "So I try my best." Battle remembers how it felt to be like Hunter. "I think I work hard because I feel that I owe that to people who have helped me along the way," he says. "Sometimes that's the only thing that gets me up in the morning. But I will get up in the morning because somebody made a way for me and helped me through."



Students in the Miami Northwestern Senior High School *Revelations* Residency are taught by Alvin Ailey's Nasha Thomas-Schmitt. *Manny Hernandez/Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater*