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Ailey's Torch Bearer Honors Another Of His Inspirations

ON a recent afternoon at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, where dancers were about to perform a run-through of "Arden Court," the sunny studio was a little too glaring for comfort. The choreographer Paul Taylor, 81, his scruffiness offset by a pair of twinkling blue eyes, watched as state-of-the-art automatic blinds worked their magic. "My new studio has an elevator," he told Robert Battle. "I'm not even sure where it is."

Mr. Battle, 39, the Ailey company's artistic director, seemed slightly embarrassed by the riches he's inherited. For his inaugural season at City Center, which runs through Jan. 1, Mr. Battle presents his dancers in their first Taylor work: the radiant 1981 "Arden Court," set to baroque music by William Boyce. It is unlikely to be the last. Mr. Taylor is one of Mr. Battle's heroes; during his dance career he was taught by Carolyn Adams, a former Taylor dancer. Gia Kourlas recently talked to Mr. Battle and Mr. Taylor about this historic modern-dance occasion. These are excerpts from their conversation.

Q. What does Paul Taylor mean to you?

ROBERT BATTLE A lot of my training was at Juilliard, and my favorite teacher was Carolyn Adams. I remember her taking me to see "Company B" and explaining the difference between dark and light, and how they could coexist. All of this stuff was a part of me really understanding modern dance. We got to do "Esplanade" when I was a student. Nearly killed me. [Mr. Taylor laughs.] By the time we got to the lift section, they would throw me out there, and I'd just get off the floor to catch the girl in the nick of time. But his work has influenced me and inspired me so much.

Q. How well did you know Alvin Ailey?

PAUL TAYLOR I felt he was a friend. I'd see him here and there. The dance world was smaller, and our paths would cross all the time. We didn't go out together for a meal or anything, but I always felt a kinship. And I liked his work very much.

BATTLE When I had this idea, Masazumi Chaya [the Ailey company's associate artistic director] talked to me about how Alvin Ailey loved and admired Paul's work, and there's a part in [Ailey's] "Streams" where he said, "This part is my Taylor sec-

tion." I'm looking at what I'm going to bring that is different and that hasn't been done on the company before. But that part is less important than how much I respect the work.

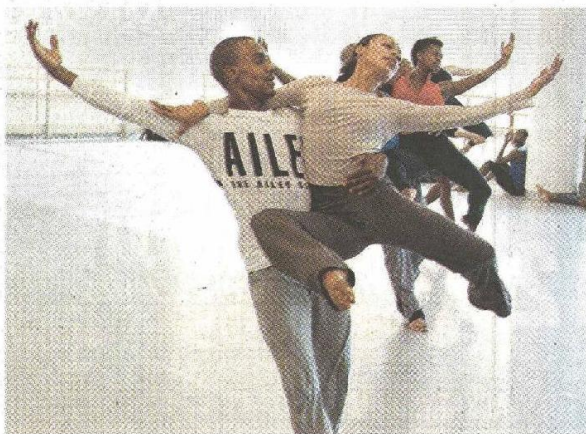
Q. Why "Arden Court"?

TAYLOR That was his idea.

BATTLE Well, I thought I'd start with the A's and keep going through the rep.

Q. You missed "Airs."

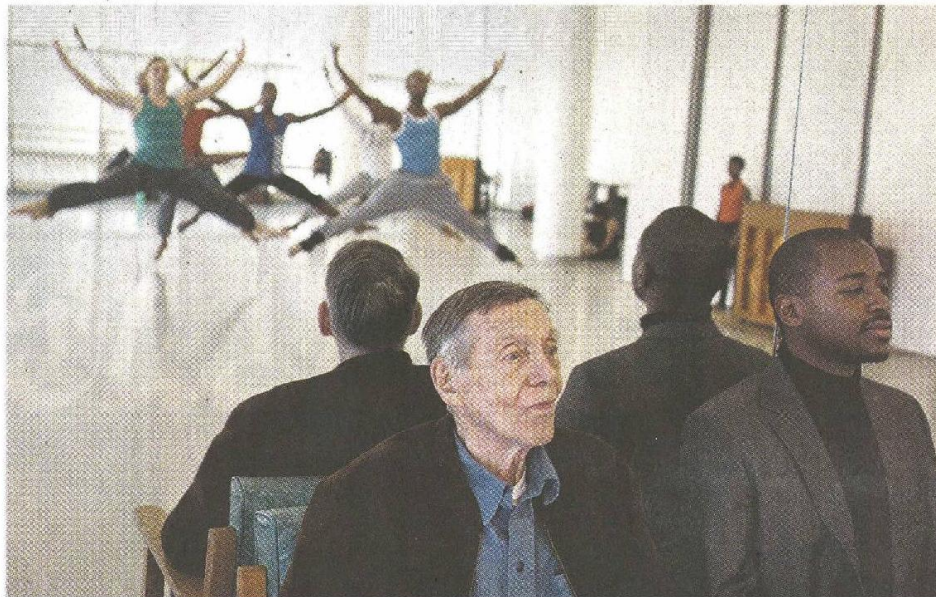
BATTLE You're good. I loved the athleticism of it. Certainly for the men, I thought this would be a great, great challenge. It's such a lesson in composition. There's all of



this energy, and then it's distilled with the men in that adagio section, which is my favorite part.

Q. Is there a story behind "Arden Court"?

TAYLOR Yeah, but it's not important. You see, my mother's favorite flower was the rose, and so when she was going to come and see the company in Washington, where she lived, I asked for the backdrop to have a huge red rose on it so hopefully my mother would know that that was for her. The other idea was that this huge rose would make the dancers look like insects. I'm fascinated by insects, you know. I



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don't think it did, but nevertheless that was the idea behind the rose.

Q. Did you choreograph "Arden Court" as a way to showcase your men?

TAYLOR Well, Robert mentioned the men's adagio. As far as I knew in general, men did not do the adagios in ballet or modern. That was for the women to do. And part of an adagio is to show off the body: Stop a moment. Let's see what you look like. And so I was very proud of the way my men looked, and I thought I would do that.

Q. How long have you known each other?

TAYLOR Oh, I feel like I've known Robert for ages, but of course I haven't. I think we just met.

BATTLE I get asked the same question about Alvin Ailey: Did you know him? I always say through a person's body of work you know them more, in a way, than you would if you said hello, so I've always felt I've known you. And if somebody asked me, I'd say, "We go way back." But no. Only through the work.

TAYLOR Wait a minute! My dances aren't me! You can't know me through my work. I don't do autobiography in dance. I hide behind something, and what you're seeing is a little bit of me maybe, but it's not me. You see, a lot of my dances are really ugly and horrifying and unpleasant, and I'm very sweet as a person.

Q. This is the second time you've watched the company perform the dance in the studio. What did you want changed?

TAYLOR Minor things, really. It was spac-

ing, but they can get that.

BATTLE You added a jeté.

TAYLOR One of the guys exits, and I added a jeté, so he'd leap off instead of running off. He leaps so nicely, I thought the more, the better.

Q. Did you ever audition for Paul Taylor?

BATTLE I did! [Laughs]

TAYLOR You did?

BATTLE And funny enough, I got in. This is when you were starting the second company. I was a junior at Juilliard, and I went for the experience, not thinking that I would get too far. And then we kept going, and I was still there. But I wasn't prepared to leave Juilliard. Everyone had sacrificed so much to get me there. And so I said, "Oh, I'd like to finish school first." I sat with you and [the former Taylor 2 director] Linda Hodes. And you said, "Well, you could go to school anytime," and Linda said, "Oh, we understand, we understand." You allowed me then to take classes in the school. I was very shy and quiet. You came into the end of the class and made your coffee like you would do and watched. People were going up and saying hello, and I thought, he won't know me. But you said: "Oh, I remember you! Marvelous dancer!" I told that story forever.

Q. What are you thinking about in terms of the next Taylor work? Can you say, or do you not know?

BATTLE I can say I don't know.

TAYLOR Well, he can have anything he wants.