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Robert Battle will become the new artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Esteemed Dance Troupe Says It Is Open to Change

To New Yorkers, to Americans and to the world, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is in most respects one of the most valued of dance companies. Its popularity speaks for itself. Just 52

**ALASTAIR
MACAULAY**
DANCE

years old, it has continually toured the globe since the 1960s, it has danced in 48 states of the union, and its yearly seasons at New York City Center are five-week lovefests between dancers and audience.

The company's importance is to some degree sociological. Though his work often celebrated his African-American heritage, Alvin Ailey's vision transcended both race and genre. The company has long been multiracial and has always relied on a repertory that covers modern dance, ballet, African dance and

other idioms. In the Ailey repertory today, as nowhere else, work by the French-born Maurice Béjart and the Italian Mauro Bigonzetti stands beside that of stateside artists like Twyla Tharp and Ronald K. Brown. It is this category-defying transcendence that justifies the "American" in the company's title; this is why the company is a cultural ambassador.

When it came to picking an artistic director to succeed Judith Jamison, the Ailey company could have easily chosen to turn itself into a heritage troupe — or into one yet more heritage-oriented than it already is. The flame could have been passed to an insider who would continue that recipe. By naming Robert Battle, however, the company is allowing the recipe to change. He is something of an

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With New Director, an Esteemed Company Says It Is Open to Change

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unknown quantity. I have no sure idea of his artistic character yet, and that, in a 37-year-old choreographer, is much as it should be. He has created a wide range of pieces. Some of them prompt wild audience ovations. I have found several compellingly shaped and one, "No Longer Silent" (2007), highly imaginative and artistically exceptional. But in 2008, after seeing an all-Battle evening with his own company, BattleWorks, I ended my review by asking, "Is Mr. Battle a genuinely exciting choreographer or merely a skilled sensationalist?" I'm still wondering.

Mr. Battle and his new troupe have plenty in common. The Ailey

A troupe shows that it's ready to revise its recipe.

company's repertory abounds in skillful sensationalism too, but only occasionally does it present choreography that's rewarding to rewatch. Of the outside choreographers whom Ailey has used under Ms. Jamison, Mr. Battle has been invited back with greatest frequency. He knows the dancers and their tradition, and he has already given them several popular successes.

It's likely that Mr. Battle will change the company, in ways that nobody should yet try to predict and that may prove exhilarating.

In an interview Ms. Jamison said that what impressed her most was the "worldview" suggested by the range of choreographers, as yet unannounced, that he wants to bring to the company. It's also likely that the company will change Mr. Battle as a choreographer.

Ms. Jamison leaves the post on June 2011. She has not altered the Ailey recipe significantly. She has choreographed new pieces (in one of them, "Love Stories," collaborating with Mr. Battle), but they haven't been central to her achievement. In her 20-year tenure the company has built a handsome multistory home in Midtown Manhattan and is continually busy with world and national tours. It has also become more central in the last decade to the New York dance calendar than any company save New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theater. Besides its City Center seasons, which fill the 2,750-seat site regularly, Ailey also enjoys two-week summer seasons at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

The company's audiences aren't just loyal, they are vociferous, and their ovations often make it seem that every single work is a hit. The bond between house and stage is like an always-high tide, and when Ms. Jamison, a natural orator, addresses the gathering at galas or other important occasions, she rides the crest of the wave better than any other dance artistic director, making an already excited throng more emotional, more grateful and more enthusiastic.

Other aspects of the current Ailey achievement are tempting



ROSALIE O'CONNOR

"No Longer Silent," choreographed by Robert Battle, the new artistic director at Alvin Ailey.

to take for granted. "Revelations," 50 years old in January, remains a thrilling work to which thousands of people return each year as if in need of a fix. It is so beloved that viewers often now whoop at the start of favorite sections; they know they're about to get the energy charge they came for. It may still be a knockout for the next 50 years.

Yet it is the sensation it is because Ms. Jamison runs a well-oiled machine in which everyone knows how to put it across, night after night. Some members of her team will retire in the next few years. Put the wrong rehearsal director in charge, downscale the energy there, adjust one rhythm: this is how other hit dances have

been eroded.

The Ailey operation today brims over with good will and good cheer, but these qualities are inspired from the top. Can Mr. Battle — can anyone — emanate positive energy in the industrial quantities that Ms. Jamison delivers? Some of her best qualities are like the best of Broadway: an outsize personality, she is authoritative, ardent, funny and exhilarating.

It's possible that the Broadway aspects of "Revelations" have become heightened under her directorship. That work — like the whole Ailey repertory — could be accentuated in other ways, possibly as artistically valid, probably less popular. Obviously she is a

tough act to follow. What will happen if Mr. Battle's luster never matches hers? At such times in a major troupe's history there is no end to these uncomfortable questions.

The Ailey company could have chosen an insider who knew how to repeat most aspects of the Ailey-Jamison formula. It could have chosen another outsider choreographer whose work was connected to African dance and the African-American dance tradition. Mr. Battle is a good choice insofar as he's an African-American choreographer with a strong track record working with a wide range of dancers.

Nobody can miss what's moving about the Ailey vision of defy-

ing categories, eluding definitions. But despite the company's tremendous charm, brilliant control, rich tone and obvious versatility, plenty of its repertory is minor choreography. Some of it is trash.

I can't see a better choice than Mr. Battle, but I'm apprehensive. In his "Unfold" (2005), for example, the man walks right over the woman precisely as the lyrics of the score sing of the woman's erotic delight. The Ailey audience loves it; don't ask me to. I don't believe that represents Mr. Battle's view of male-female relations; I do believe it represents his successful notion of how to whip up applause. Likewise the silent screams that occur in several of his pieces: clichés, but popular ones.

His "No Longer Silent," on the other hand, was complex, with simultaneous activities — some traumatic — suggesting layers both primitive and modern. In that as in some of his works for his own company (including the 2008 male solo "In/Side," which Ailey acquired in 2009), Mr. Battle excels in making his dancers seem driven, involuntary, hectic. Are these qualities he wants to express? Or does he just like the effects they make?

The first signs of the Ailey future will come with the other choreographers Mr. Battle brings to the repertory. In what ways will they enlarge it and challenge the dancers? The biggest change the Ailey company could have right now is a repertory that matches "Revelations" with a wealth of other dances worth repeated watching.