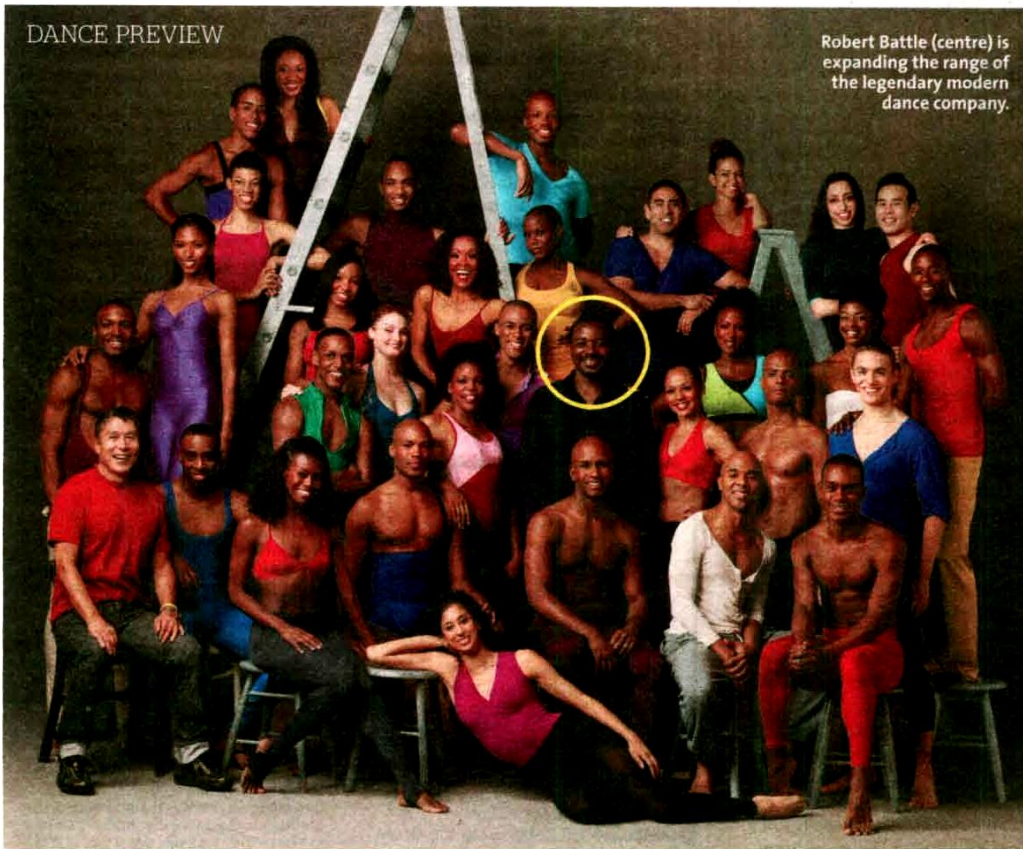


February 2, 2012

DANCE PREVIEW

Robert Battle (centre) is expanding the range of the legendary modern dance company.



## Ready to do Battle

Alvin Ailey's newest artistic director makes some major moves **By GLENN SUMI**

**ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER** with choreography by Ailey, Robert Battle, Paul Taylor, Joyce Trisler and Rennie Harris, at the Sony Centre (1 Front East), from tonight to Saturday (Thursday, February 2 to February 4), two programs, Thursday-Saturday 8 pm, matinee Saturday 2 pm. \$28-\$88. 1-855-872-7669, [sonycentre.ca](http://sonycentre.ca).

ONE OF ROBERT BATTLE'S FIRST dance memories involves moving to the song *That's Entertainment*. Little did he know how prophetic that title was.

"My mother was a big fan of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly, and when I

was young she played piano and I'd sing and mimic the movement. I always say she ruined me right then and there."

In the 80s, Battle could also do a mean Michael Jackson imitation, but it was a school trip to Miami Beach to see the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater that changed his life.

"That's when I saw *Revelations* for the first time," he says, about the signature Ailey piece. "It was riveting. I never forgot it, and it's one of the reasons why I kept going and am where I am."

Where that happens to be one of the most prestigious positions in the modern dance world. Since last sum-

mer, he's been artistic director of the Ailey, the third person to hold that position after Ailey and his successor, Judith Jamison.

Significantly, Battle has included the classic *Revelations*—scored to various genres of African-American music—on the two programs that he's bringing to the Sony Centre this weekend. He's also included three of his own works (*Takademe*, *The Hunt*, and *IN/SIDE*) already in the company's repertoire, as well as pieces he hopes will expand the company's range.

One is *Arden Court*, created by modern dance great Paul Taylor—whose roots aren't exactly in African-American culture.

"We are the Alvin Ailey *American Dance Theater*," says Battle from his Manhattan office. "Taylor is an American master, and I think it's fitting that we have one of his works, as we are a repository for great modern dance works."

The two men got to bond last fall, when Taylor helped oversee the company's version for their New York season.

"I think he really loved the idea of the company doing the repertory," says Battle. "He felt a camaraderie with Mr. Ailey, since they both started their companies around the same time. It was wonderful to have him in the studio with the dancers."

Battle, in his late 30s, knows he's got to make the company relevant to new generations while satisfying loyal fans. Which explains his first commission, *Home*, by hip-hop choreographer Rennie Harris.

"I think younger people can feel disconnected from modern or concert dance," he says. "[Hip-hop dance] is sometimes so commercialized, or we only celebrate negative images of it. To put it in a positive context and go back to its real roots is important. This dance represents a lot of people who don't always feel represented on the concert stage."

*Home's* also symbolic because it's a contemporary response to HIV and AIDS. Ailey died from the syndrome in 1989.

"AIDS is still around, and I wanted to put it on the table so we don't forget," he says.

"Mr. Ailey died at a time when the stigma around it was almost as debilitating as the disease itself. You couldn't say you had it—and even after death it had to be shrouded in secrecy and shame. In a way, I wanted to remember his death and also remember his life.

"And hip-hop has so much to do with survival." ©

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