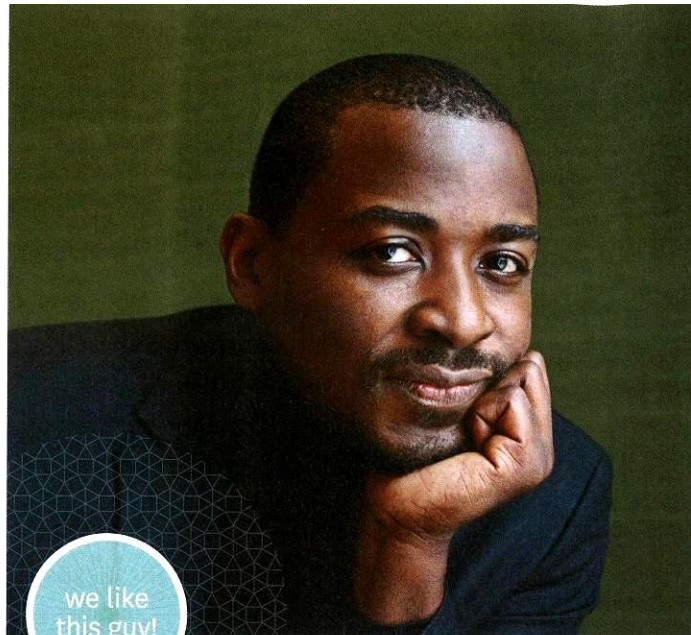


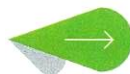


July 2011



## A Step Ahead

Choreographer **Robert Battle** shakes things up as the new artistic director of the iconic Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.



**FEW WOULD HAVE BET ON** Robert Battle becoming a great dancer: Raised by relatives in a poor Miami neighborhood, Battle (who was “no bigger than a loaf of bread” when they took him in, according to his great-uncle) wore braces as an infant to straighten his bowed legs. But alone in his bedroom, he was a star, imitating the moves of Michael Jackson, Fred Astaire, and Gene Kelly in front of the mirror. “Performing was my escape,” Battle says, “my way of feeling fearless.” Eventually, he went on to study at Juilliard; found his own dance company, Battleworks; and choreograph for Alvin Ailey, among the country’s most esteemed troupes. This month Battle takes over as Ailey’s artistic director, a position held by only two other people in 53 years: Ailey himself and the beloved, newly retired firebrand Judith Jamison, who has called Battle “without question the creative force of the future.”

It’s easy to see why. Battle’s innovative dances pulsate with primal energy and potent emotion, demanding intense precision and physical prowess from performers. But Battle knows his job isn’t just about beautiful moves: He plans to continue the company’s tradition of fearlessly spotlighting social issues. (Ailey set the bar high with *Revelations*, a 1960 survey of African-American history that galvanized white audiences.) During the company’s U.S. tour next spring, Battle will interpret for the stage ten stories of people confronting HIV/AIDS. “I’ve always believed that modern dance is about activism,” he says. “I want to keep raising the consciousness level.”

For some, the pressure of leading such a legendary institution would be daunting. But Battle believes challenges are what propel him forward: “All of us are overcoming something,” he says. “That tension creates a spark. When we dance, the leg doesn’t always go happily into the air—frankly, it would rather be on the ground. But there’s something about the effort it takes to achieve beauty that makes magic.”

—BROOKE KOSOFSKY GLASSBERG