

Review: New artistic director keeps Alvin Ailey Company riveting The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was electrifying on Tuesday night at the NAC.

By Natasha Gauthier
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OTTAWA — In July 2011, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater named Robert Battle as its new artistic director. The 40-year-old Miami native is only the third leader in the company's history: the formidable Judith Jamison took over the reins after Ailey's death in 1989, and Battle was her personal choice for passing on the torch when she retired last year.

The company performed at the NAC Tuesday night, their first Ottawa appearance since 2007. It was clear that Battle is deftly balancing respect for the company's tradition and history with his own distinct taste for different vocabularies and new explorations.

Battle is no stranger to Alvin Ailey. A gifted graduate of Juilliard's dance program, he choreographed many pieces for the group during his tenure as artist-in-residence, which began in 1999. Two of Battle's own works were on display, and if they are an indication of the direction he means for the company, they are headed for a very exciting future.

Battle's 1999 solo *Takademe* has become a favorite of dance showcases and festivals. It is brief but astonishing, a quivering, caffeinated, streetwise little piece of cheek mixed with virtuosity, and set to South Indian rhythmic syllables. Kanji Segawa performed the piece with all the frenetic energy of an anime character. Battle's *The Hunt*, from 2001, is an intense, electrifying, athletic showcase for six of the company's extraordinary male dancers. Dressed in long black skirts lined with scarlet, they strut and leap like warriors to the "jungle jazz" beats of percussion group Les Tambours du Bronx.

Percussion music of a very different flavour — post-modern classical — provided the score to *Streams*, an abstract, streamlined work created by Ailey in 1970. The piece is punctuated by long, angular balances and slow bent-arm turns, the spiraling movements reminding the viewer of a Calder mobile. Linda Celeste Sims, with her laser-cut lines and endless extensions, was stunning.

In *Urban Folk Dance*, a 1990 piece by the late Ulysses Dove, two couples sit at tables in apparently adjoining apartments. From their cold, confrontational, body language, the story becomes clear: the woman in one pair is cheating on her man with her neighbour's boyfriend. Dove packs huge emotional punch in a very economical, efficient and concise piece. At one point the men clasp their partners to their chests, but the women slither out, leaving the men grasping at air: you don't own me. Hope Boykin, with her expressive face and incomparable, fearless attack, was first among this quartet of equals.

The night ended with the crowd favorite, Ailey's *Revelations*, which is celebrating its 52nd anniversary this year. Ghrai DeVore and Glenn Allen Sims were breathtaking in *Fix Me, Jesus*, while Sean A. Carmon, Michael Jackson Jr. And Michael Francis McBride set the stage on fire in the *Sinner Man* trio. The audience was so appreciative that the company danced the final movement, with its fan-waving church ladies in yellow, all over again as an encore.

