

Alvin Ailey company, now led by Robert Battle, returns to Charleston for Spoleto Festival

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By Eliza Ingle

What will make an audience return to see the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre kick off another Spoleto Festival season?

Will it be to see how Robert Battle, the newly anointed artistic director, will put his stamp on this cultural treasure of a company? Maybe.

Or to see the showstopping and iconic work “Revelations” that brings audiences to their feet each time it’s performed? Possibly. Perhaps it is the awe-inspiring dancers who carry this historic company and will surely deliver a vibrant, top-notch performance? Definitely.

For more than 50 years, Alvin Ailey has been synonymous with the triumphant embodiment of the human spirit. Its originator came from rural Texas and was affected by his church, his family and the civil rights movement. His dream was to create a first-of-its-kind company, a vehicle for African-American dancers to tell their stories of faith, hardship and strength.



“I believe dance came from the people, and that it should always be delivered back to the people,” Ailey once said. Today the company continues as one of the world’s best with dancers, exquisite in their athleticism, grace and dramatic elegance.

After Ailey died in 1989, the company was taken over by the regal Judith Jamison, one of his best dancers and a strong leader who carried his vision for another two decades, keeping both the company and the elite school running like a top. Last year, Jamison handpicked Robert Battle as the company’s third artistic director, a young choreographer who had his own company and whose work she admired. “Robert Battle is, without question, the creative force of the future,” she said last year.

On his way to work at the Joan Weil Center, a Manhattan building constructed in 2004 for the company, Battle shared his thoughts on the work to be done. How will he usher the company into the next chapter?

“My mantra is that the company is interested in upholding the idea of past, present and future,” he said. “The history we have is our greatest strength. I am always conscious of staying true to our roots, and every decision must reflect where we come from. For the future, it is my intention to stretch both our audience and our dancers.” (Nine are newly hired.) “I continue to be inspired by the curiosity of invention.”

The program that will be presented in Charleston has many surprises and an old favorite, “Revelations.”

Battle said the classic deserves repeated viewing. “Like the ‘Mona Lisa’ or Mozart, it is an icon,” he said. “There is still a great energy, like seeing it for the first time. It transports you, like the first time I saw it as a young boy in Miami, it was indelible in my mind.”

Other pieces on the program will include Paul Taylor’s “Arden Court,” which Battle commissioned to honor the influential modern dance choreographer.

“I love Baroque music, and I wanted to challenge people by not only what they are seeing or dancing, but what they are hearing,” Battle said. “There is a great joy in the dancing, something I feel a lot of right now.”

Two of Battle's own works are in the show, and one of them, "Takademe," he created in his living room in 1996. "It reflects where I came from and moved from a small space out to stages all over the world."

He intends to keep his choreography generating but is happy to include other works, such as Rennie Harris' "Home," which deals with the subject of HIV, the epidemic that took Ailey's life. "I love Rennie's approach to hip-hop dance, which he uses in the most theatrical way," Battle said.

The other showstopper will be Ohad Naharin's "Minus 16" with its unconventional elements and audience participation. "I love the uniqueness of Naharin's work; it is perfect for our company, which celebrates cultural expression and history," Battle said.

Spoletto Festival General Director Nigel Redden said the main reason the Alvin Ailey company is back in Charleston for the fourth time is because Battle has taken the helm.

"He's someone who very much wants to communicate with an audience," Redden said. "And I feel that that change has already happened with the company. There's a kind of generosity of spirit that has always been there, but it's grown. ... I think that audiences will see a difference."

Battle said his vision coincides with Ailey's on many levels. As a child he was brought up by family who had strong faith and an appreciation for the arts and teaching.

"I was brought up to go beyond myself, to extend a hand to dancers, audiences and students," he said. "There is a spiritual reciprocity which I love."

Alvin Ailey Dance

Performances: 7 p.m., May 25; 8 p.m., May 26; 2 p.m., May 27 at Gaillard Municipal Auditorium

Master class: 10-11:30 a.m., May 26, Dancefx, 635 Rutledge Ave. Open to local students. Call 637-4722 for information and to register.