

The Boston Globe

Robert Battle looks within to lead Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

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By Karen Campbell

Robert Battle was only 14 when he and his classmates were taken to see a concert by Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. It was there, in Miami, that he experienced his first live performance of Ailey's signature gospel-driven piece, "Revelations."

"I'd seen videotapes in class, but nothing prepared for that 3-D moment of live performance," Battle recalls. "It was overwhelming. I grew up in the church and sang in the choir, so I knew so much about what I was hearing, but what I was seeing was totally new. It left an indelible impression, and I'm sure it's why I'm here today in this position."

"This position" is the artistic directorship of the internationally acclaimed Ailey troupe. Battle, 39, is only the third such leader in the company's 54-year history, following Judith Jamison, who handpicked him as her successor, and Ailey himself, who died in 1989. When the company makes its 42d Celebrity Series of Boston appearance Thursday through April 29 at the Citi Wang Theatre, Battle will have been at the helm for almost 10 months. "So far, so good," he says, quoting a recent New York Times review of the troupe.

Though Battle never performed in the company as Jamison did, his connection to the organization dates to 1991, when, after his freshman year at the Juilliard School, he began taking summer classes at the Ailey School. Over the years, he has choreographed nine works for the main Ailey company; Ailey II, its second company; and the Ailey School. He danced with David Parsons from 1994 to 2001, and in 2002 founded his own troupe, Battleworks Dance Company, which he disbanded when he took the Ailey job.



Ailey artistic director Robert Battle watches Yannick Lebrun (left) and Kirven Boyd rehearse "Takademe." Photo: Andrea Mohin/The New York Times



Robert Battle (center) rehearses his work "Takademe" with Linda Celeste Sims and Yannick Lebrun. Photo: Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Battle has stepped into one of the most important leadership roles in the modern dance world, but he disputes those who might assume he is intimidated by the company's illustrious history. He considers his job a calling, and he has been clear about his goals from the start. "I feel my mission is to honor the past, honor the tradition," he said in a recent phone interview from New York. "History is the anchor, and honoring that is the only way we can move forward. It's part of the cornerstone of the company."

Battle is not about to turn the Ailey organization into a dance museum, however. "It's definitely about fostering the next generation of choreographers, especially African-American choreographers, and to make sure that we continue to reinvent ourselves — past, present, future. . . . The direction of the company has to speak to our time."

Already, Battle is setting the tone with distinctively wide-ranging repertoire. The upcoming performances include five works the company is dancing for the first time in Boston, two of them created by Battle. The solo “Takademe” marked Battle’s first choreographic relationship with the Ailey organization when he set the work on Ailey II in 1999. A complex, fast-paced deconstruction of Kathak dance set to a rhythmically propulsive score by Sheila Chandra, the work is one of Battle’s earliest professional creations, and its restricted use of space stems from the place of its genesis. “I choreographed it in a tiny living room in Queens,” he recalls with a chuckle. Battle’s martial-arts-inspired “The Hunt,” on the other hand, is boldly unrestrained and thrillingly visceral, showcasing the athletic vigor of six of the company’s men.



Battle is the third artistic director in the 54-year history of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Photo: Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Paul Taylor’s lush, lyrical “Arden Court” is a modern-dance classic set to a rich Baroque score by William Boyce. This season is the first time the company has performed a work by Taylor, a master craftsman whose expansive use of space has long inspired Battle’s own choreography. In stylistic contrast, Ohad Naharin’s popular “Minus 16” is strikingly rigorous, often stark. It breaks the fourth wall by sending dancers out into the audience, another first for the company. The work’s wit and deep humanity made an instant impression on Battle when he saw it during the Juilliard Dance Division’s 50th-anniversary celebration in 2002. “I remember thinking that I’d never thought of dance in that way,” he says. “It’s a rare gem that changes the way you look at dance.”

Probably the most highly anticipated work is the new “Home,” which was created for the company by hip-hop pioneer Rennie Harris. The piece premiered on Dec. 1, 2011 — World AIDS Day — exactly 22 years after the disease killed Ailey at 58. “The essence of the piece is about survival,” Battle says. “What it really gets down to at the core is a celebration of life and the tenacity of the human spirit.”

In Boston, the company closes every program with “Revelations,” which has been seen around the world. That’s a tradition that Battle is not about to mess with. Renee Robinson, now celebrating 30 years with the company, concurs.

“It’s a dance that came from Alvin Ailey’s deep, deep blood memories about going with his mother to the Southern Baptist Church in Texas,” Robinson says. “It’s about how the people moved, what they sounded like, what the heat felt like. And it belongs to the people. I believe what they say: that we [in this company] are cultural ambassadors to the world.”

Robinson, the last dancer currently in the company to have been chosen by Ailey himself, is the only performer who has worked with all three directors. “I feel so lucky, so blessed, so fortunate for those years with the founder, and to have all those rich years with a powerful female director,” she says. “And how lucky am I to be around to see this new beginning.”

That trajectory is very much in Battle’s sights as he moves the company forward in a manner consistent with what Ailey envisioned from the start. “Alvin Ailey used to say that dance comes from the people and should always be brought back to the people,” Battle says. “He was a young black man in the US who had a vision that he wanted to express something about our experience through dance theater. Without that, we wouldn’t be here.”



Robert Battle with artistic director Judith Jamison. Photo: Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Kirven Boyd, a Dorchester native who has danced with the Ailey company since 2004, says he believes Battle is unafraid of taking risks. He likens the artistic director's repertoire-planning mind-set to that of a "mad scientist."

"It's like he's rubbing his palms together and thinking: What can I do to keep audiences interested, more than just entertained?" Boyd says. "He seems to be thinking how he can push the envelope of what people are comfortable seeing us do — make the audience appreciate us in a different way — and it keeps our artistic juices flowing."

Battle's job is a complicated dance. With a \$30 million annual budget, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater supports its two touring troupes, a school training 3,500 young dancers, an extension program reaching roughly 13,000 students a year, considerable outreach initiatives, and a new choreographic lab.

"It's like putting together a fun dinner party," Battle says. "Everybody brings a different dish and I get to decide what it's going to be. It feels like a conversation among all these voices."

And one of those voices belongs to his predecessor.

"The best advice Judith Jamison gave me is 'Trust your instinct. That's why I chose you.' And that's very important for me to remember.

"This feels right, like this is where I'm supposed to be, and I'm enjoying watching the dancers take on these new challenges and embrace the future," Battle says. "I'm looking forward to what's next."

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Citi Wang Theatre, 270 Tremont St. Boston, MA

866-348-9738

First Performance: April 26

Closing Date: April 29

Ticket Price: \$35-\$85

Company Website:

<http://www.celebrityseries.org>