



Proud Return

Miami native Robert Battle is back in town as artistic director of the famed Alvin Ailey dance troupe

GETTING READY: Robert Battle with AAADT dancers rehearsing his 'Takademe' at the Ailey studios in New York.

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On an icy night in late December, Miami native Robert Battle, the new artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, saw his past and future come together in the heart of New York City.

He rushed from backstage, where his Ailey dancers were warming up, to a reception room off the lobby of the packed City Center Theater, where he greeted two teachers who had guided him at the New World School of the Arts: Peter London, beaming and laughing, and Gerri Houlihan, whom Battle adores and still addresses as "Ms. Houlihan."

After a year and a half of public grooming, of working alongside his towering predeces-

or, Judith Jamison, Battle was finally at the head of modern dance's most famous company, and in programming the troupe's annual five-week season at City Center, a major event in the New York dance world, he had made his real debut as director.

The moment was one he'd anticipated with a mix of excitement and fear.

"Certainly there was that part of me that thought, 'What if people don't show up?'" Battle says. "That sense of 'Oh my goodness, I'm finally here.' But then it all went down, and everybody showed up, and it all worked out."

With all the famous and powerful folk he meets these days — last week Battle chatted

• TURN TO AILEY, 4M

• AILEY, FROM 1M

with Michelle Obama after one of the Ailey troupe's sold-out shows at the Kennedy Center — he has a special regard for the people who shaped and taught him growing up in Miami. He's looking forward to lots of hometown love when the company returns beginning Thursday for what has become a regular engagement at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts.

"It's great to celebrate with people in New York," says Battle, 39, who grew up in Liberty City and studied dance at Miami Northwestern Senior High and New World before heading to New York's Juilliard School in 1990.

"But the people that saw you grow up in dance, who saw me as the scrawny little boy who hated wearing tights, when I was painfully shy ... we all look at each other and say, 'Can you believe this? When I see them it reminds me that this is amazing. The feeling I get is it happened to me and to us.'"

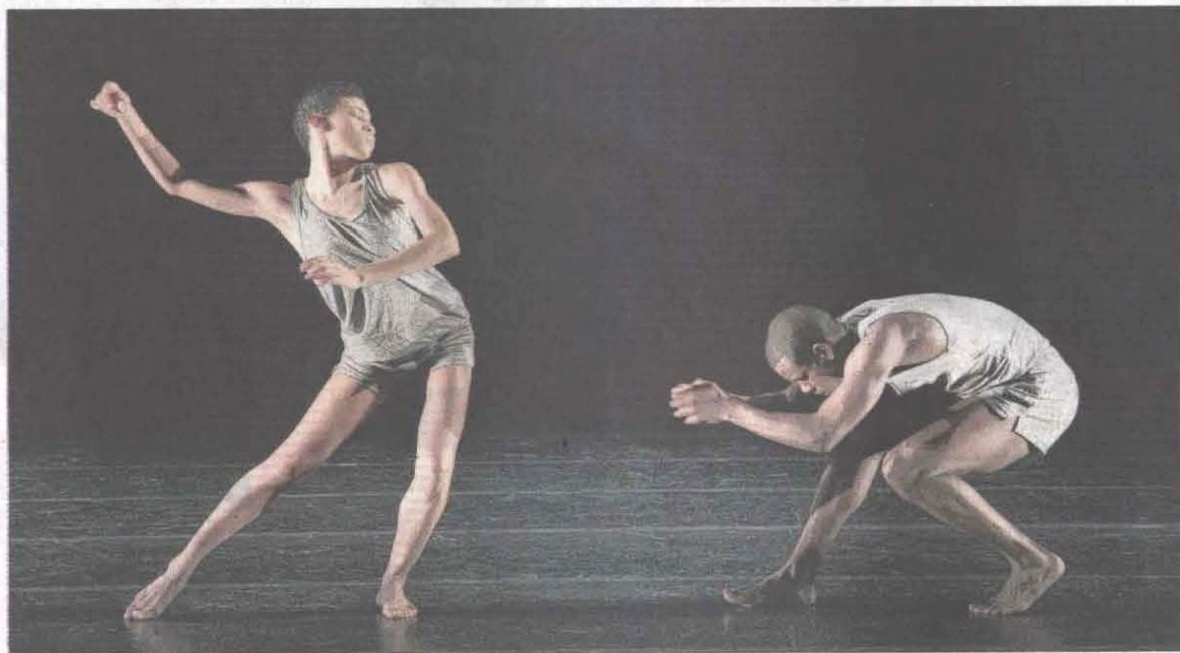
That sense of responsibility to a larger dance community and to his roots are guiding Battle as he begins to shape this enormously popular and expectation-laden institution. His appointment is the most visible aspect of a generational shift at the 54-year-old Ailey troupe. Sharon Gersten Luckman, the executive director since 1995, departs in 2013, while Sylvia Waters retires this year after 35 years as head of the junior troupe, Ailey II. Many of the company's 32 dancers are new; nine started in 2011, and 21 — two-thirds of the company — have come on since 2008.

"Every time there are changes in the company people reassess," Battle says, adding that a number of dancers departed to start families or new careers. "But a lot of these changes had been sought out."

Where Jamison had been a star dancer and protégé of founder Alvin Ailey, Battle had never been a member of the company, though had he taught and choreographed for it.

"Mr. Ailey set up such a foundation, and Ms. Jamison took it to such a level," said Matthew Rushing, a 20-year Ailey dancer who has taken on the additional role of rehearsal director. "But spending time with Robert, I realized that his not being part of the company gives him another perspective, so he can take the company in directions we cannot see."

Battle's perspective is apparent in the new pieces he has brought to the troupe's repertory, all of which will be on show in Miami this week. They include *Home*, a hip-hop dance commissioned from Rennie Harris; *Arden Court*,



ICONIC: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Ghrai DeVore and Kiven J. Boyd in Ohad Naharin's 'Minus 16.'

PAUL KOLNIK

a lyrical 1981 work by modern dance master Paul Taylor, and *Minus 16*, by Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin. Also scheduled are Battle's own *Takademe*, set to percussive Indian Kathak music, and *The Hunt*, an explosive dance for six men that was a Miami audience favorite last year. *Revelations*, founder Ailey's powerful signature work, will be on every program.

The new pieces were a hit with City Center audiences, says Ariene Shuler, executive director of the theater that has been Ailey's New York home for 40 years.

"This season was very, very successful," Shuler said. "The audiences were very enthusiastic, very receptive. The level of dancing is always high, but there was a real spark and energy. The dancers are so remarkable that I think everyone shares the same idea that it's good to keep stretching them in other ways."

"Robert has really taken charge. ... He has very big footsteps to fill, and I think he's definitely meeting the challenge."

While Naharin and Taylor are not radical in the dance world, they are new to the Ailey troupe. Taylor's sculptural, weighted style is a departure from the explosive, full-tilt dancing that has become an Ailey signature, as is Naharin's loose but gutsy, ripped-from-the-inside aesthetic and more open compositional style. *Minus 16* starts with an improvised solo at

intermission and includes a segment in which audience members are brought onstage to dance with the Ailey troupe. (Battle jokes that he's seen some of them signing autographs in the lobby afterwards.)

The revered but reclusive Taylor invited Battle to his Long Island home to offer one of his pieces and made a rare appearance at the *Arden Court* premiere. "It seemed he could see I was taking on such a large role, and I think he felt respect for that," Battle says.

Both Taylor and Naharin are white, and while the company has long been integrated on every level, most of its dancers and choreographers are still black, and a sense of African-American pride and achievement has been an important part of its legacy. Now Battle says he wants to stretch its repertoire and identity to claim all of modern dance as a part of the Ailey tradition.

"In my opinion what Mr. Ailey was building on was that anything is possible as an African American," Battle says. "We can do anything."

That could include works, he says, by modern dance godmother Martha Graham (whose technique was a major influence on the young Ailey) and post-modernist Merce Cunningham.

"I'm looking at truly making us a repository for great modern dance work," Battle says. "As the field changes and evolves, I'm making sure we honor that American tra-

dition of modern dance."

Battle is also fostering young choreographers with a new program that provides funding, studio space and mentors for struggling dance artists who might be the next Taylor or Ailey — an effort he hopes will benefit not just his company but his art form.

"This lab is really about Ailey, yes," he says. "But it's about the field as well."

Learning the new pieces was exhausting, says Rushing. "By 7 p.m. not only is your brain fried, but your body is burned out as well," he says. But the dancers exulted in the challenge, he adds.

"We always want more from who we are," he says. "The only way to get that is to learn things where you're not comfortable or you don't know."

One new company member who has received enthusiastic attention this season is Alicia Graf Mack, 33, who danced with the Ailey troupe from 2005 to 2008, then left because of ill health. She returned last year, drawn in part by the company's new leader.

"Robert is the type of guy who can pull out your best self," Mack says. "He's very easy-going but very clear about what he wants. He gets results not by fear, but by making you feel 'Oh you're beautiful, let's just go ahead and do this.'"

Battle does think Mack and her cohorts are capable of just about anything, even when they're struggling with a new challenge like *Ar-*

den Court.

"The effort is what makes it so beautiful," he says. "I like to see that. I'm bored when I don't see that intense effort."

Part of what Battle finds moving about *Home*, which is Harris' interpretation of 10 real-life stories about living with HIV, is the way the central figure, portrayed by Rushing, keeps rejoining a community of dancers that rejects him. "That dance is about tenacity and pushing forward," he says.

Alvin Ailey, who struggled with poverty and racism to launch the troupe that Battle now heads, and who died of AIDS in 1989, would have understood.

If you go

What: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Program A: "Arden Court," "Minus 16," "Revelations." Program B: "Home," "Takademe," "The Hunt," "Revelations."
When: 8 p.m. Thursday (A), 8 p.m. Friday (B), 2 p.m. Saturday (B), 8 p.m. Saturday (A), 2 p.m. Feb. 26 (A)
Where: Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, 1300 Biscayne Blvd., Miami
Tickets: \$20-\$120 at www.arshtcenter.org or 305-949-6722