

November 25, 2011

DANCE

New twists for Ailey troupe

RENOWNED ENSEMBLE WILL OFFER SURPRISES IN ANNUAL NEW YORK CITY CENTER RUN

By Robert Johnson
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Choreographer Robert Battle trained at Juilliard. He never was a street dancer. Yet Battle, the artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, says that hip-hop fascinates him, particularly when he watches a master of the genre like Rennie Harris approach a problem in contemporary dance.

Battle's curiosity and his admiration for the skills he didn't learn at Juilliard help explain why Harris, the renowned popper and locker who directs his own Puremovement company in Philadelphia, was invited to create a new work for the Ailey company this season. "Home," a dance about the AIDS crisis, will receive its premiere on Thursday, the day after Ailey opens its annual engagement at New York City Center.

Recalling an earlier collaboration with Harris, on a piece called "Love Stories" in 2004, Battle says: "I was struck by his conceptual approach — the way he would think of transitions, the way he would look at detail, and

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Where: New York City Center, 55th Street between Sixth and Seventh avenues

When: Wednesday at 7 p.m. (opening night gala) then through Jan. 1 with shows Tuesdays at 7 p.m., Wednesdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 7:30 p.m., with matinees Saturdays at 2 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m.

How much: \$25 to \$175; call (212) 581-1212 or visit nycitycenter.org.

his sense of theater."

Battle says that this time, watching Harris in the studio, he learned more about hip-hop as Harris explained the origins of movements from the house era and the breakdance era, and drew connections between hip-hop and traditional African dance.

Set to darkly ironic house gospel music by Dennis Ferrer and Raphael Xavier, "Home" describes a pastor's

struggle to come to terms with the AIDS epidemic and the attitude of social outcasts who find a new home in dance clubs, "deep, deep where the sun don't shine." Hip-hop dancing offers African-Americans a different kind of homecoming, Battle says, because "It has to do with reclaiming our culture, reclaiming our drums."

Other novelties this season revive old friendships and personal connections. Battle explains that he grew enthused about Paul Taylor's work when, as a student, Battle danced his "Esplanade" and studied with the choreographer's protégées Carolyn Adams and Linda Kent. The Ailey company is adding Taylor's "Arden Court" to its repertoire, and Battle says he especially admires the way this dance showcases the company's men.

"I love the beauty and the simplicity of it," Battle says. "I love the romance."

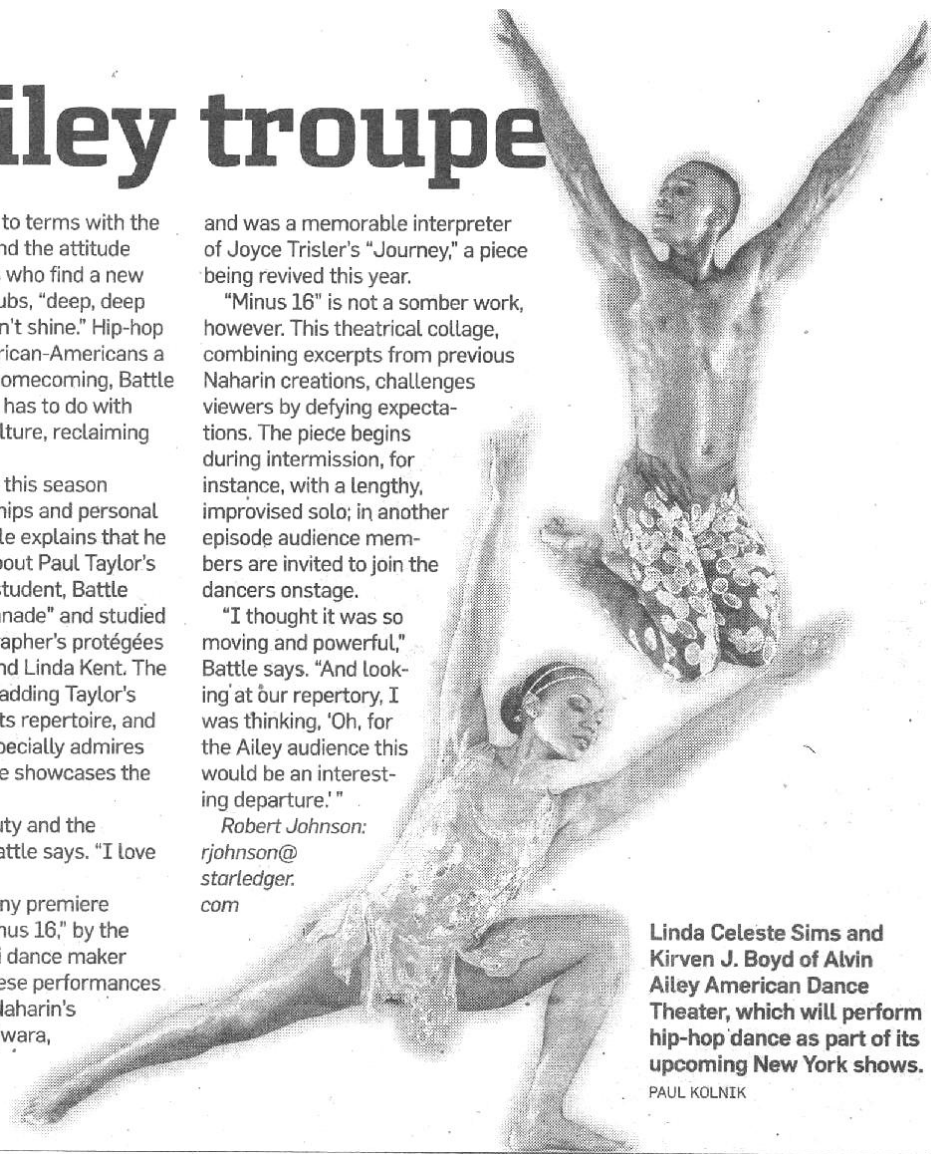
Another company premiere this season is "Minus 16," by the celebrated Israeli dance maker Ohad Naharin. These performances are dedicated to Naharin's late wife Mari Kajiwara, who danced with the Ailey troupe for 14 years

and was a memorable interpreter of Joyce Trisler's "Journey," a piece being revived this year.

"Minus 16" is not a somber work, however. This theatrical collage, combining excerpts from previous Naharin creations, challenges viewers by defying expectations. The piece begins during intermission, for instance, with a lengthy, improvised solo; in another episode audience members are invited to join the dancers onstage.

"I thought it was so moving and powerful," Battle says. "And looking at our repertory, I was thinking, 'Oh, for the Ailey audience this would be an interesting departure.'"

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Linda Celeste Sims and Kirven J. Boyd of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, which will perform hip-hop dance as part of its upcoming New York shows.

PAUL KOLNIK