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# Big leap forward



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Robert Battle's "The Hunt," which will be performed this weekend in Newark. PAUL KOLNIK

## WITH NEW ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, AILEY TROUPE IS ON THE CUSP OF A NEW ERA

By Robert Johnson  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Robert Battle is still artistic director "designate" of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater — he officially takes the steering wheel from outgoing director Judith Jamison on July 1. Although his appointment was announced last year, he says 12 months of preparation have barely been enough to learn to drive the Ailey showboat — a fully loaded SUV, whereas his own former company, Battleworks, was a sawed-off compact minus the frills.

"When I first heard about the year-long prep, I thought, 'Oh, my goodness. That's a long time.' But now it seems like just yesterday," Battle says.

Although in some respects all artistic directors have the same worries, the hugely successful Ailey company has so many tendrils — the school with its extension classes, the junior ensemble Ailey II, the summer camps and more — that even with staff support the director's attention is divided. Then there's the task of maintaining and expanding the Ailey repertoire.

This weekend at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, the troupe will present the highlights of its last New York season. Anchoring these

mixed bills is "Revelations," the late founder's spiritual masterpiece; along with his otherworldly "Memoria" and "Three Black Kings," a series of subtle dance portraits. Geoffrey Holder's "Prodigal Prince" is a flamboyant spectacle recalling the delirious inspiration of Haitian painter Hector Hyppolite.

Battle's own "The Hunt" displays a stomping male ensemble inspired by Goju-ryu karate, Martha Graham technique and South African gumboots dance. Battle describes emerging choreographer Camille A. Brown's "Evolution of a Secured Feminine" as a quirky gestural dance that tells the story of a relationship from the woman's point of view.

Battle won't announce his own plans for next season until May 12. In the meantime, however, he vows that the preservation of America's modern dance legacy — not just the Ailey company's — will be as much a concern as nurturing new choreographic talent.

Battle cites his experiences as a student at the Juilliard School and his relationship with dance educator Carolyn Adams (founder of a preservation initiative called the Repertory Etudes Project) as keys to his thinking.

"We are poised to be a re-

pository," Battle says. "I think that was Mr. Ailey's hope, and certainly it is mine."

Although Battle did not come up through the ranks of the Ailey organization, in some ways his background sounds familiar. Discussing Ailey's "Revelations," Battle recalls his churchgoing experiences and his youthful desire to become a minister.

"I was in tears after this one particular sermon," Battle says. "I felt it, the same way I felt 'Revelations,' and I thought, 'I want to do that.'"

"My great-uncle, who raised me, would bring a tape recorder and tape the sermons. I learned every word, and I'd put on my little bathrobe and get in front of this stool, and I'd pretend to be preaching."

Now, Battle says, the Ailey company will be his pulpit.

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### Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

**Where:** Prudential Hall at New Jersey Performing Arts Center, 1 Center St., Newark

**When:** Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m., Sunday at 3 p.m.

**How much:** \$23 to \$92; call (888) 466-5722 or visit [njpac.org](http://njpac.org).