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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Performers from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater rehearse for their forthcoming performance of Robert Battle's 'The Hunt.' Above right, Mr. Battle, the company's incoming artistic director, addresses his dancers.

CULTURE CITY | By Pia Catton

At Ailey, the Battle Has Only Begun



When the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater opens its new season

Wednesday night at New York City Center, it will mark the 50th anniversary of the company's signature work, "Revelations."

But the gala program will also look to the future: On the bill is "The Hunt" by incoming artistic director Robert Battle, who will succeed the company's current artistic director, Judith Jamison, when she steps down on July 1, 2011.

Mr. Battle, 38, has been creating dances since his childhood in Miami. He studied at the Juilliard School before joining the Parsons Dance Company. In 2002, he launched Battleworks Dance Company, and his pieces are in the repertory of modern dance troupes around the country. Already, 11 have been danced by Ailey and its sister company, Ailey II.

With several months to go before his tenure officially begins, Mr. Battle is making the transition from choreographer

to choreographer-curator-manager-fund-raiser with charm and good humor. With an eye on the fall season and his role in it, he sat down recently to discuss his creative past—and future.

What were your first choreographic instincts?

Anything I ever learned, I wanted to teach. When I learned martial arts, I would get my friends together and convince them they needed to learn martial arts. When I started to learn dance, same thing. I remember making a video to the song "Word Up." There was always this sense of wanting to lead. In Miami, I made our screened-in porch my studio. My best friend Clarence and I would imitate Michael Jackson. Painted on the wall—still, though it's faded—are the words "Dance Boss: Robert Battle." I'm not making this up. You can check it with my mother.

How did you make the transition from martial arts to dance?

Clarence was taking dance at the Performing and Visual Arts Center in Miami, and he

would teach me what he was learning. I was in the singing program. I had this high-pitched speaking voice. I sang soprano in the church choir. And we would trade what we were learning. I was so fascinated. When my voice started to deepen, I decided to audition for the dance program. I was about 14 and going into the ninth grade.

It must have been a successful audition. How was the training process?

I had very open hips because of karate. As soon as the teacher saw that grand plie in second position, I knew I was in. I loved ballet. I had an amazing teacher who gave me books on Nureyev, Baryshnikov, Makarova. I didn't just look at them, I looked into them. I could look at one photo of Makarova for 30 minutes and study every muscle.

You saw Alvin Ailey's "Revelations" for the first time around that age. How did it affect you?

Being a young person growing up in the church, and seeing something of your story onstage, it was a revelation, in-

deed. It wasn't about swans. It was real life. That was a riveting moment, and also empowering, because it said, "Your story is valid."

With so much to learn on the administrative side these days, are you still making dances?

My choreographic self is quiet right now. I'm building up ideas on the side, but right now I'm really focused on how to grow this.

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How do you see the company growing?

There are choreographers who haven't worked with the company. Every time I say this, people focus on the notion of having European choreographers. But some will be choreographers down the street or some of the great American masters who have yet to contribute to the repertory. It's

important that we continue with the notion that Mr. Ailey started with: This is a repository for the great modern dance works. This company is not always credited for the variety in the repertory. We have ballets by Hans Van Manen, Tally Beatty, Ron Brown, Mauro Bigonzetti. At any moment, we are in the past, present and future.

Having led your own company, you must know the stresses facing choreographers. How do you plan to balance creating dance works and giving others a platform?

I can make a dance in the basement of a church—because I have, with them not knowing I was there. But what I am most excited about is my new role of checking out emerging artists, taking them out of the basement and giving them the opportunity to grow. Also, mid-level choreographers are sometimes left in the dust. They can't get this or that because they are "established," but they're not [up] here. I'm interested in trying to find ways to support that—not just driven by what goes on stage

at City Center.

Opening night includes the company premiere of "The Hunt." It came to the company through Ailey II. What was the process?

I was with Parsons Dance, and we did a workshop with students at Skidmore College. I had 11 dancers that I had to make a dance on. Someone handed me this music by Les Tambours du Bronx. I said fine: It's an easy rhythm. I can keep these people together. I made simple movement: hop-hop, heel-heel, stamp-stamp. Then David Parsons asked what I was going to do on the company that year. I thought I'd use the same material and make it into a men's quartet. So I made "The Hunt." Sylvia Waters [artistic director of Ailey II] said, "We need that for the second company."

Now it's launching the main company's season. That must be validating.

Some of the criticism was that it's simplistic. Well, everything doesn't have to be complicated, does it? Can't we just dance and people have a good time?