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DANCE

Company blends hip with homage

Alvin Ailey director adds contemporary works to old favourites for troupe's four Toronto shows

MICHAEL CRABB
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Sizzling physicality and technical prowess have always been attractive hallmarks of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, but when the New York-based company returns Thursday to the Sony Centre you may be surprised by what's changed since its last visit in 2008.

There's a host of new faces, 21 in all. Nine of those, almost a third of the company, were hired by 39-year-old Robert Battle, who last summer succeeded long-serving Judith Jamison as artistic director.

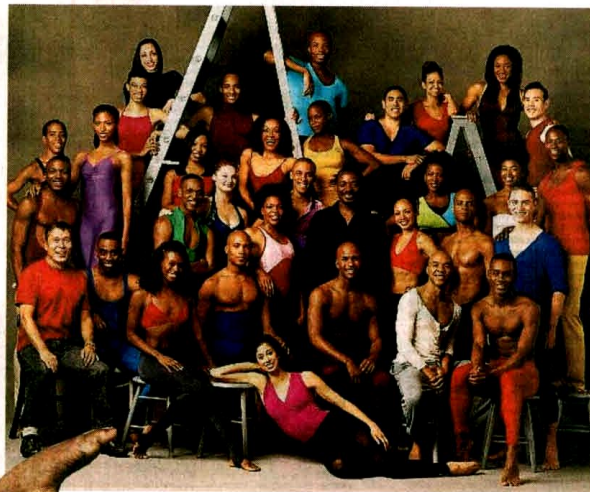
Battle is too diplomatic to suggest the Ailey troupe needs significant retuning, but he's aware of criticisms that it's traded too long on what *The New York Times'* Claudia La Rocco recently described as clichéd ideas "of heroic strength and we-shall-overcome uplift."

Battle's repertoire choices for his inaugural season suggest a determination to dispel such accusations. "Expect the unexpected," says the personable and articulate Battle. "I'm the kind of guy who likes to keep you on the edge of your seat."

Audience favourite *Revelations*, founder

Alvin Ailey's iconic 1960 ode to his black southern roots, closes both programs alternating during the four-show Toronto run, but the remainder suggests a major esthetic realignment.

For the first time in its 54-year history, the Ailey company is dancing a work by American master choreographer Paul



ANDREW ECCLES PHOTOS

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre now has 21 new faces, including nine dancers hired by Robert Battle.

Taylor, *Arden Court*. Battle is also reviving *Journey*, an early solo by American modern dance legend Joyce Trisler, and Ailey's *Streams*, a plotless 1970 work to Miloslav Kabelac music.

The rest includes more contemporary fare. Battle has programmed three of his own works, including *The Hunt*, a viscerally thrilling dance for six men propelled by the music of Les Tambours du Bronx. Perhaps Battle's most interesting commission is *Home*, by hip-hop choreographer Rennie Harris. It's inspired by the stories of people affected by HIV. Following its December premiere, New York critics lauded *Home's* urban edginess and welcome lack of maudlin senti-

mentality.

Battle's accession to leadership of the world-travelled Ailey troupe surprised many observers. Unlike Jamison, previously one of Ailey's star dancers, Battle came to the troupe from the outside, as a choreographer. He's what he calls "an extended family member." Yet, that measure of distance is perhaps Battle's strongest suit.

Battle grew up in the predominantly black Miami neighbourhood of Liberty City. His birth mother was, as he puts it, "not in a position" to care for him. He was brought up by relatives.

As a kid, he wanted to sing and play piano, loved martial arts and started dance classes. Then, in Grade 9, he



Robert Battle took over as Alvin Ailey artistic director last summer.

saw *Revelations*. "It was a huge moment for me. I'd started taking dance but didn't really know what I was doing until witnessing *Revelations* and seeing myself reflected in it."

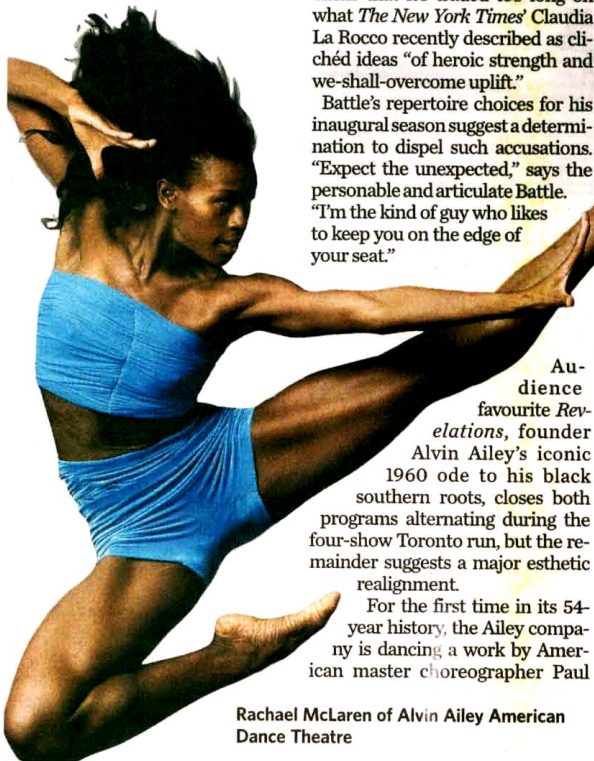
It pointed Battle down a road that led to New York's Juilliard School. Its four-year dance degree program is regarded as one of the best in the world.

In 2001, Battle formed his own Battleworks Dance Company but had already begun his "extended family" relationship with Ailey. Despite that close relationship and his affinity for the Ailey company's Afro-American roots, he was "totally taken aback" when Jamison asked if he'd be interested in taking over.

Heading such a storied company with an almost possessively loyal audience is not a job for the faint-hearted.

As Battle sees it, "The challenge is to find the right balance. It's certainly not all about new work. I'm embracing the past and using it as springboard," he explains. "I'm going to be looking at both ends of the spectrum and in between."

And he constantly remembers Jamison's reassuring words: "Remember, you're not filling shoes, but you are standing on shoulders." Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre performs Feb. 2 to 4 at the Sony Centre, 1 Front St. E. Go to www.sonycentre.ca or call 1-855-872-7669.



Rachael McLaren of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre