

Ailey celebrates 60th anniversary by nurturing new talent

By: Zita Allen

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Sixty years in the life of any company is an accomplishment, but in the life of a Black dance company, it is a triumph against tremendous odds, especially when that company first came into existence during the racial unrest characterized by this country's tumultuous civil rights era. Therefore, it is noteworthy that as part of the Ailey Ascending 60th anniversary celebration, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Artistic Director Robert Battle has created the Choreography Unlocked Festival to honor this company's founder and its remarkable accomplishments by also nurturing new talent with performances, conversations and master classes that will take place at Ailey's home across two weekends—Oct. 12 to Oct. 14 and Oct. 26 to Oct. 28.

"I love the title Robert chose for this event, 'Choreography Unlocked,'" Jawolle Willa Jo Zollar said recently. The noted choreographer and founder of Urban Bush Women told the *Amsterdam News*, "It's about understanding this process. Being a choreographer is not a mystical gift that's bestowed on an anointed few, and this event is about unlocking that process. There's a way to understand it in terms of process, production, funding, all those levels. I remember when I thought, 'I'm not a choreographer. I didn't get that gift.' I was watching Ron K. Brown. He was so facile. I thought, 'I am not facile. I didn't get that gene.'" Turns out she was totally wrong. "Now that's what we want to do for others, unlock that process," she said.

To do that, the folks at Ailey have brought together a remarkable group of the art world's movers and shakers, who will participate in stimulating panel and other events over two weekends. It begins Friday, Oct. 12, at 6 p.m. with Battle joining choreographer Ron K. Brown for a discussion titled "Unlock-



Jawolle Willa Jo Zollar rehearsing Shelter with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

ing the Mystery of Choreography." Battle follows up Saturday, Oct. 13, at 4 p.m. moderating the discussion "Nurturing New Voices," which looks at how institutions can encourage emerging artist across genres. Featured on that panel are Thelma Golden, Studio Museum director and chief curator; Rennie Harris, choreographer and Ailey's 2018-19 artist-in-residence; Tarell Alvin McCraney, Oscar-winning co-writer of "Moonlight" and Yale Drama School graduate; Shanta Thake, the Public Theater's senior director of Artistic Programs; and Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation.

As if to demonstrate what Choreography Unlocked looks like, there will be performances at the Ailey Citigroup Theatre both Friday and Saturday evening of that first weekend that feature works by New Directions alumni Netta Yerushalmy, Juel D. Lane and Camille A. Brown.

The second weekend, Friday, Oct. 26, and Saturday, Oct. 27, is equally exciting with stimulating conversations about how curators process choreography, with Judy Huddle Taylor, Dancespace Project executive director and



Artistic Director Robert Battle

(Andrew Eccles photo)



Jawolle Willa Jo Zollar

(Crush Boone photo)

chief curator. Huddle Taylor explores this question Saturday, Oct. 27, at 8 p.m. on a panel entitled "Process and Research" that will include Ailey's own Matthew Rushing and Urban Bush Women founder Zollar.

Zollar said that one of the key things folks will hear about is the importance of following their passion. "I think first you have to have a driving passion for learning," she said. "I tell aspiring choreographers to go and see all

kinds of work. And when you go, think of yourself going to work and come out with at least two or three ideas. Don't just look at whether or not you like it or don't like it. Look at the lighting, the textures, the feeling. That way you're really studying it." Learning is what these two weekends of Choreography Unlocked is all about.

Topping it all off, the public will have a rare opportunity to learn choreography from Battle when he teaches an

Ailey Extension choreography workshop Sunday, Oct. 14, at noon. Other activities include workshops for students of the Ailey School's Professional Division led by Rushing (Friday, Oct. 12, at 1:30 p.m.) and Zollar (Friday, Oct. 26, at 2 p.m.), and workshops led by Zollar (through Urban Bush Women's Choreography Institute Initiative) for New Directions alumni and invited choreographers Saturday, Oct. 27, 4 p.m. and Sunday, Oct. 28, at 3 p.m.