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Robert Battle Likes to Cook, and Connect

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"I always say that pessimism and anger is a place that I visit, but my permanent address is optimism and hope," said Robert Battle, the artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Since the pandemic lockdown in March, Battle has been consumed with keeping the company in shape. Until Wednesday, a collaboration among Battle, his predecessor, Judith Jamison, and the choreographer Rennie Harris will stream on Ailey All Access. Battle has recently been considering the organization's role in the Black Lives Matter movement. "I've been thinking a lot about the notion of, before it was a hashtag or a movement, that the Ailey company was demonstrating that Black lives matter in all of the work that we do," he said. "But it's almost not enough to live it. You have to say it expressly, that this is what we do and we are in solidarity. It's not that we need to reinvent the wheel, but we need to roll it." These days Battle is hunkered down in Connecticut, tending his vegetable garden alongside his dog, North. He elaborated on the 10 things that have kept his mood aloft. These are edited excerpts from the conversation. KATHRYN SHATTUCK

1 Sarah Vaughan's 'Sassy Swings The Tivoli' (1963)

My mother and a friend of hers, they would listen to Billy Eckstine and Ella Fitzgerald, but mostly Sarah Vaughan. When I was a kid, they would sit on the front porch, have a glass of wine, and that was their way of winding down. My mom's friend bought me a cassette tape of her singing, and I played it until it snapped. That passion for Sarah Vaughan has never left me.

2 His Piano

My mother played piano for the church that I grew up going to, and there was a Kimball piano at home. They discovered that I had an ear for music and so they got me piano lessons. I studied until I got involved in dance, at about 11 or 12, and then it kind of disappeared on me. But I've always needed to have a piano around, even if I just play the same songs that I already know.

3 Cherished Family Photos

My grandfather raised me since I was 3 weeks old, and I think that's where my sense of strength and duty and perseverance comes from. He only made it to the third grade because his parents died and he had to raise his siblings. My mother inspires me because of her artistic inclinations. She nurtured that performer in me. And although I was being bullied in my neighborhood, Liberty City [in Miami], I had a whole different message at home — that being an artist was almost kind of normal. And of course Alvin Ailey, so that I'm always reminded of the shoulders on which I stand.

4 Tabitha Brown's Videos

Tabitha Brown I found because she was going on this journey of becoming a vegan. Coming from where I come from, I didn't know a lot of African-American people that were vegetarian or vegan. Sometimes the way she talks about it, I'm that close to trying. And then the meat part of me gets the best of me. Because I love ribs and steak and it's just — I'm sorry. I can't.

5 Maya Angelou

I hardly get through a speech or an interview without saying some quote that I've gotten from Maya Angelou. Her life, you know from "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," it's really a life well lived. And she wasn't afraid to express those things that were difficult for her. So I connected with the poetry. She did, for me, act as a kind of guide without her even knowing it.

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6 Trying New Recipes

Cooking, it's almost like making a dance, except nobody complains when you say, "Slam yourself to the floor." The notion of starting with these few ingredients, or sometimes a lot of ingredients, and slowly developing the flavor — there's just something about the practice that really excites me and relaxes me and gives me some sense of control. I can't change the pandemic, but I can certainly make a mean fried chicken with almond flour.

7 Dancers Connecting

When this whole thing went down and we came off the road, Miranda Quinn, who was a new dancer, had the idea of doing a "Brady Bunch" version of the first part of "Revelations." The dancers in their different homes — you could see the dogs running past — they made it very real. And it caught fire on social media, which led to us codifying it into something called Ailey All Access. They also did DancerDiaries, where dancers would talk about how they were feeling in this moment, and physicalize it and verbalize it in a way that was really touching and beautiful. Their need to connect with audiences no matter what was really inspiring.

8 Home Gym

It keeps me sane because I no longer dance, but we still need to get moving and get that energy out as most dancers will testify to. So it's been a nice little respite, and it's hard to make excuses when it's literally two steps from my bedroom. But I still find a way to make excuses.

9 Robin Roberts on 'Good Morning America'

She's such a fan of the company, and I just love her indomitable spirit. I've watched her for years through some of the tough times in her life. People like that have so much to teach us about grace under fire and about courage being not the absence of fear but the presence of it, and the desire to go forward anyway.

10 Backyard Time

If you had asked somebody who knew me years ago and you'd said, "Oh yeah, he has a vegetable garden and a dog," they would have said, "You have the wrong person. No way." But being in nature sort of changed my feelings around. It's those little things that you can control, watching a tomato plant go from this little nothing and struggle up then bear fruit. And dogs I love because no matter what, they're happy to see you. It doesn't hurt if you have a rib in your mouth. Then they're doubly happy to see you.