

Robert Battle at Full Throttle

By: Wendy Perron

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When you're enjoying the easygoing, joke-telling manner of Robert Battle as the welcoming emcee of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, you might not realize there is a ferocious choreographer underneath all that charm. To celebrate his 10 years as artistic director, at New York City Center on Tuesday night the company presented seven works Battle's created over the last 22 years. Each one held bold surprises—even for those of us familiar with his work.



At the Dance Magazine Awards the previous night, Judith Jamison, in presenting the award to Battle, said, "I love watching Robert's bravery." I think she meant both his bravery as a choreographer and as an artistic director. As the latter, he has expanded the Ailey repertory with so many interesting choices—Aszure Barton, Wayne McGregor, Johan Inger and Kyle Abraham—that we tend to forget about Battle himself as a choreographer.

Well, the program at City Center reminded us in a big way. Robert Battle is a choreographer of masterful restraint and sudden explosiveness. He is a choreographer who has definite musical tastes and finds a different, original movement vocabulary for each of those music choices.

With a disciplined sense of suspense, he makes us wait for the big moment. In *Mass* (2004), a devotional piece of skittering, swirling and vibrating and a modernist sense of design, the 16 dancers sometimes lock into off-kilter positions of stillness. And then a burst of momentum pushes these monklike figures across the stage in an agitated, unstoppable herd. In his portion of *Love Stories* (2004, originally a triptych with contributions from Judith Jamison and Rennie Harris), we crave to be carried on a high by Stevie Wonder's songs, but Battle reins the dancers in with strict unison until the very end, when he unleashes a torrent of wild revelry.



In *Unfold* (2007), the extreme attenuation for the woman—in this case a ravishingly arching Jacqueline Green—is sustained throughout this short work to the operatic voice of Leontyne Price. Green's partner, Jeroboam Bozeman, seems like a lost soul clinging to his memories. With a slow *développé* to the side, toes pointing upward, Green hits the high note just when Price does. It's the kind of satisfying convergence that Battle is careful not to overuse.

The evening's emotional range went from the desperation of *In/Side* (2008)—which finds Yannick Lebrun staggering and spiraling to Nina Simone singing "with your kiss life begins"—to the giddiness of *Ella* (2008), in which two dancers (Renaldo Maurice and Patrick Coker) physicalize Ella Fitzgerald's speedy scatting that ricochets between popular tunes of the 50s and earlier. The work that premiered this season, *For Four*, laced its full-bodied jazz moves with *chaîné* turns and *cabrioles*, and somehow it all fit into the robust Wynton Marsalis score. The projection of an American flag onto one dancer seemed to suddenly curtail the dancers' freedom and make them feel trapped.

*Takademe* (1999) never fails to excite. With crackling energy, Kanji Segawa mirrors Sheila Chandra's staccato stutterings, deep exhalations and vocal spurts. A brief, enchanting masterwork, *Takademe* is where language, voice and movement mingle—at top speed and intricacy. In his opening speech to this program honoring him, Battle graciously pointed out that David Parsons gave him his first chance to choreograph, and he, Battle, has given Jamar Roberts his first chance. And so the chain of extraordinary artistry continues.

