

The New York Times

This is My Choreography Now'

By: Brian Siebert

December 1, 2021 ([online 11/30/21](#))

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JASMINE CLARKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Robert Battle, the artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Robert Battle recalls a decade with the Alvin Ailey group.

By BRIAN SEIBERT

Robert Battle, the artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, sitting in his office at the company's headquarters recently, pointed to a photo on the wall.

It was a composite image, made 10 years ago, of three faces. At left was Alvin Ailey, who formed his namesake troupe in 1958 and built it into an institution of cultural pride and unparalleled popularity. In the center was Judith Jamison, the company star who succeeded Ailey at the helm after his death in 1989 and led the organization into financial stability. And on the right was Battle, who was never a member of the company but had just taken over as its director.

"Wow, OK, a little pressure," Battle said, understating how he felt back then.

"I wanted the job, but I had doubts," he continued. "I had this fear that the audience wouldn't show up, that people would say, 'The era is over.' But people are still showing up."

This, too, was an understatement. Even during a pandemic that kept the Ailey company offstage for more than a year, it is financially stable and artistically thriving. On Wednesday, it returns to New York City Center for its annual December season. A week or two shorter than usual (through

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Dec. 19), the run will be — apart from a few excerpts at the BAAND Together Dance Festival in August — the company's first series of live performances since March 2020.

That's plenty to celebrate, but the company will also commemorate Battle's 10 years in charge with a program devoted solely to his choreography (Tuesday and Dec. 11 and 17). Such a focus on his dances is rare. When he took over as director, Battle was an independent choreographer with his own company, raising the possibility that his works would come to dominate the Ailey repertory. That didn't happen.

But Battle, 49, has transformed that repertory nevertheless. While maintaining Ailey classics and the near-ubiquity of Ailey's signature masterpiece, "Revelations," he has brought in works by unexpected choreographers like Paul Taylor, Ohad Naharin and Wayne McGregor. He has commissioned pieces by Kyle Abraham, the hip-hop master Rennie Harris and Ronald K. Brown, who many Ailey watchers had hoped would succeed Jamison. In 2019, he chose Jamar Roberts, a dancer in the company, as its first resident choreographer, discovering and nurturing one of today's most acclaimed voices.

With Battle's encouragement, these and other artists have taken risks both stylistic and thematic — addressing gun violence, the impact of the prison system on Black families, lynchings, massacres. There have



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been a few duds and misfires, but the standard critical complaint of the Jamison years — that the new repertory didn't do justice to the always exceptional Ailey dancers — is now seldom heard.

"Battle has been diligent in expanding the Ailey legacy according to its inciting logics," said Thomas F. DeFrantz, the author of "Dancing Revelations" and a professor of dance and African American studies at Duke University. "He has balanced the three-part mission surprisingly well, presenting new work by young artists, presenting works by established artists from a broad range of choreographic traditions, and telling stories of Black life in dance."

And what does Jamison think, 10 years on? "I knew Robert would have a different palette," she said, "but he understands the tradition of the company, which has always been forward-thinking. He's been delivering beautifully, which is what I expected."

The Ailey legacy has also been on Battle's mind. In his office, next to a desk he inherited from Ailey, holding a talismanic prism that Ailey owned, the man in charge spoke of second-guessing his choices, wondering "Would Ailey have liked this?" He recalled how Jamison told him to trust his own voice, and how the approval of the audience helped his confidence. Only recently, though, has he been feeling fully comfortable in his position, ready to go another 10 years.

What he is most proud of, he said, are the chances he's taken, the swerves away from what he thought people presumed he might do. One of his first moves, for example, was importing Taylor's "Arden Court," a bucolic modern classic set to Baroque music, not the kind of trendy selection that might have

Top, a scene from "Ode" (2019) by Jamar Roberts, whom Robert Battle made the company's first resident choreographer. Above, Battle's "Awakening" (2015). Right, Daniel Harder as Alvin Ailey in "Lazarus," a Battle commission to the choreographer Rennie Harris.

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DUKE UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR



anticipated from a new, young director making his mark.

"I see evolution and revolution differently," he said, explaining how being raised by his great-aunt and great-uncle taught him to look at things "through an older type of wisdom that doesn't necessarily go with the flow." (That upbringing might also account for the down-home humor that has characterized his public speaking.)

Another example of swerving: commissioning a celebration of Ailey's life for the company's 60th anniversary from Harris, a hip-hop choreographer, because "nobody would expect that."

What Battle appreciates in Harris, he said, is "how his mind works and how he sees things that I don't see." Battle recognized something similar in Roberts's choreography: "How is he seeing and hearing that? Where is this movement that I don't recognize coming from?"

"I wanted Jamar to have a place to continue his investigation," Battle said. "I've never asked him to do anything specific. I

want to pay it forward because that opportunity was given to me."

Battle was referring to when he was a member of David Parsons's company in the 1990s. "I liked making little things," he said, and Parsons "saw that and put some of it on stage." Those works were what attracted the attention of people at Ailey, leading to commissions for the company and eventually to the directorship.

But when Battle took over at Ailey, he didn't program much of his own choreography. "I wanted to be looked at as a curator," he said. "And I knew that every step I took was going to be held up against the legacy. I couldn't create in that."

In the years since, when friends and fans of his choreography have pressed him to do more of his own work, his response has been that artistic direction is his work. "This is my choreography now," he tells them.

Apart from "Awakening," a major premiere for the company in 2015, he has preferred to contribute occasional pieces from

his back catalog. "I find a little thing that fits into the repertory, and that makes it more personal," he said.

His new "For Four" — one of two stage premieres in the City Center season; the other is Roberts's "Holding Space" — came about "because we needed something for this summer's virtual gala," he said. "It tricked me to having a bit of fun because I didn't feel the pressure."

The tumult of the last two years, he said, forced him to see some things differently. He long resisted digital content, but the closing of theaters and the example of his dancers — who, at the start of the lockdown, filmed themselves doing "Revelations" wherever they were sheltering — taught him "that we could move into the digital space with a purpose other than just doing what the cool kids do."

At the end of March 2020, the company started Ailey All-Access virtual programming. "And now millions of people have seen the company that might not have," he said. "We've had to let go of our old thinking."

And after the racial reckoning of 2020, he said he was also reconsidering how Ailey can be part of topical political conversations, "not because somebody expects us to, but because it's our mission."

He noted his decision to use the American flag pointedly in his latest dance. "I was a Boy Scout," he said, "but now a house with the flag has become an oppressive symbol. I wanted to show how it's been co-opted, as if it didn't belong to me." Both the allusion and the explanation are unusually explicit for a spokesman who is typically careful not to offend.

"This is a real generational chasm," Battle said. "My great-uncle was born in 1903. If he was talking about a white person, it was in a hush. He was the strongest man I knew, but you didn't talk about these things. Now the younger generation of dancers are saying that we need to talk about it and show where we stand as an organization."

"But I think a bridge is being constructed," he said. "So much of what we do at Ailey has always been about the notion that Black lives matter."

He cited the new documentary about Ailey by Jamila Wignot as a timely reminder. "You can sort of invent what he might have thought," Battle said, "but to actually hear him say, 'Not all my works are political, but I'm a Black man living in this country. I can't help but be affected.' That's totally current."

"The knee-jerk thing is to overcorrect," he said. "But sometimes you need to double down in your mission. Sometimes you have to think about what doesn't change, what shouldn't change."