

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Alvin Ailey troupe returns to the Fox

By: Cynthia Bond Perry
February 7, 2022 (Online 2/4/22)

ALVIN AILEY returns to the Fox



After nearly 2 years of waiting out the pandemic, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will return to the Fox Theatre Thursday-Sunday. COURTESY OF DARIO CALMESE

10 years in, Robert Battle reflects on his Ailey legacy.

By Cynthia Bond Perry
For the AJC

Instinct rather than intention guided Robert Battle, artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, when he choreographed the image of dancer Renaldo Maurice, a Black man, draped in the American flag.

Battle had envisioned his piece, "For Four," as a light opener to a jazz score capturing the pandemic's pent-up energies. But at some level, Battle said, he needed to respond to the murder of George Floyd and "these fragile times in our democracy."

When Battle watched the U.S. capital under siege on Jan. 6, 2021, he saw the American flag used as a weapon, "not only physically," Battle said, "but also in terms of who gets to be patriotic, and who decidedly doesn't have that privilege."

Battle wanted to see the flag image reflected on the Black body, he said, "and to have people interpret it however they will."

The thought-provoking interlude echoes impulses of Alvin Ailey, who founded his company

Since Robert Battle became the company's artistic director, he has seen a through line from Alvin Ailey's artistic path to his own.



DANCE PREVIEW

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Thursday-Sunday. Programs vary, with the exception of "Revelations," which is performed at all shows. Battle 10th Anniversary program will be performed at 8 p.m. Thursday and 3 p.m. Sunday. \$29-\$89. Masks and proof of vaccination or negative COVID-19 test required. For details, see Fox Theatre Health and Safety Protocols. Fox Theatre, 660 Peachtree St. NE, Atlanta. 855-285-8499. foxtheatre.org. "Ailey," the documentary film by Jamila Wignot, is available through PBS.org and several streaming platforms, free through Friday. For details, visit pbs.org/ailey.



Robert Battle drew out personalities of Alvin Ailey dancers Belen Indhira Pereyra, Samantha Figgins and Renaldo Maurice in "For Four," set to music by Wynton Marsalis. COURTESY OF PAUL KOLNIK

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Ailey

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on the cusp of the civil rights movement. At that time – and perhaps now – a Black man expressing a full range of human emotions on stage made a political statement.

When the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater returns to live performances at the Fox Theatre after an almost two-year absence, Thursday-Sunday, its five-show run will offer a chance to reflect on the company founder's life and to celebrate Battle's 10 years as artistic director.

The world premiere of "For Four," adapted from a film version created for the company's 2021 Spring Gala, will be part of Battle's opening night 10th Anniversary program. This year's line-up also includes an evening of seminal Ailey works, including "Cry,"

a female solo Ailey created 50 years ago and dedicated to "all Black women everywhere – especially our mothers."

A third program features Renée Harris' "Lazarus," a stunning two-act work inspired by Alvin Ailey's life that is part of Jamila Wignot's 2021 documentary film "Ailey," currently streaming online. Each performance will close with Ailey's American masterwork "Revelations."

Both Ailey and Battle have tapped political topics of their day, but the span of their works this season reveals many facets of human experience, with inspirations ranging from the Black church to jazz, blues and classical music. Through individual styles and voices, each choreographer has lifted up the beauty of African American culture while showing its universal relevance.

Battle's "Mass" drew from childhood memories of singing

in his church choir. Set to a score by John Mackey, the 2004 work for 16 dancers was the third in a series of dances exploring religious themes, a "physicalized version of singing in a choir," Battle said, with "a mass of people being pulled and pushed in the space, and the soloists emerging from the mass."

American jazz and popular music opened a range of emotions to the young Battle as well as space to delve into personal experiences, with none more personal than "In/Side," a gripping solo based on Battle's experience growing up in Miami's predominantly Black neighborhood Liberty City.

Battle didn't fit in as a child – he preferred piano and choral music to sports. He was picked on, sometimes threatened, which made him increasingly shy and introverted. At one point during high school, Battle took to carrying a hammer in his dance bag in

case he needed to defend himself.

Memories of waiting out deadly hurricanes, brought forward through Nina Simone's song "Wild Is the Wind," Battle said, set the tone as "In/Side" reveals the internal struggle of "that young, fearful person trying to express himself."

Battle's sensuous, swirling duet, "Unfold" evokes the tenderness and ecstasy in Gustave Charpentier's aria "Depuis Le Jour" and draws inspiration from the moment Battle first heard the voice of trailblazing opera singer Leontyne Price. "I had never heard that kind of singing, especially by a Black woman," said Battle. "It was a revelation to hear her sing so beautifully."

These and other voices are integral to Battle's work. "I feel that some of those dances I started making when I was a kid in my mind somewhere," Battle said. "When they finally poured out, they would usually only take me

two hours or so to choreograph," Battle said. "Because somewhere in me, I was always hearing those voices."

Since Battle became the Ailey company's artistic director, he has seen a through line from Alvin Ailey's artistic path to his own. Both leaders resisted pressures to be "put in a box" as Black artists. Part of Ailey's legacy, Battle said, is that "you should only be limited by your imagination."

"You can hear it in the lilt, in the lyricism of his voice," said Battle, "in the curiosity that he had as an artist, as a human being."

Like Ailey, Battle connects with "the notion that we are more alike than unlike." He cited one of Maya Angelou's favorite quotes, often attributed to the Roman slave playwright Terence: "I am a human being. Nothing human can be alien to me."

Said Battle, "In my opinion, that is revolutionary."