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Pandemic revived Ailey dance company director's own creativity

BY SARAH L. KAUFMAN

When he became the artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater 10 years ago, Robert Battle stopped seeing himself as a choreographer.

"In fact," he said in a recent phone interview, "there were parts of me that didn't really think I would make another work."

Paradoxically, making work is precisely why Battle had landed at Ailey in the first place in 2011. It was his skill as a choreographer and director of his own small troupe, Battleworks Dance Company, that caught the attention of one of the world's most prestigious modern-dance organizations. Judith Jamison, Battle's champion and predecessor at Ailey, hailed him as "the creative force

of the future."

It has taken years for Battle, 49, to muster the nerve to create again.

He made a piece for the company in 2015, but since then, leadership responsibilities crowded out the artist in him: raising money, choosing repertoire, overseeing the internationally touring company as well as its junior troupe, Ailey II, and the Ailey School. Promoting the vision of founder Alvin Ailey, who died in 1989, and expanding the Black-led, Black-centered organization he left behind. Carrying on the legacy.

There also was an inherent intimidation factor. Battle was regularly bringing in established, first-rate choreographers to create premieres. Could his own work measure up?

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A creative revival during a pandemic

BATTLE FROM E1

Being vulnerable and in charge at the same time — that was a headache he didn't have time for, he reasoned.

"The kind of intimacy that is needed to make work," Battle says, "to drown out everything else and go into your own creativity — it's very hard to find the space for that."

Then the pandemic smothered everything, wiping Battle's calendar clean, and crazy as it sounds, it helped him. The shutdown provided space, and the racial reckoning, a spark. Battle dusted off some of his older works. And for the first time in years, he created a new one.

Washington audiences will get a good look at Battle's creative side when the Alley company returns to the Kennedy Center Feb. 1-6 for the first time in two years. On offer are four programs (and Alley's gospel-inspired spirit-lifter, "Revelations," will cap each one). They feature a slew of works by Alley, one by resident choreographer Jamar Roberts and several Battle pieces. Two performances are specially dedicated to him: "Battle 10th Anniversary," with seven dances by the director.

To be sure, most of the Battle pieces date from his previous life. He created all but one years before he took over at Alley, including the witty solo "Lakademe," exploring Indian Kathak dance rhythms, made while he was a member of David Parsons's group, Parsons Dance, in 1999, and "Ella," an explosive tribute to female power and to Ella Fitzgerald's scat singing.

His new creation (to be performed opening night, among others) is called "For Four." With a quartet of dancers bounding to feverish jazz by Wynton Marsalis, it's a seven-minute affirmation that Battle the artist is back in business.

For all that was lost during the pandemic — months of touring and revenue, time with his dancers, donor events, not to mention human companionship — Battle, who lives alone, gained something important.

"In this moment of stillness, I moved closer to my choreography and creative self," he says.

His dog, North, barks in the background, like a little amen. Battle introduces him over the phone as his personal north star, a dependable comfort, especially during the months of isolation.

"In the quiet, in the stepping away because we weren't traveling, in those moments when there's nothing one could do, I could hear my choreographic voice again," he continues. "It was the opposite of being stifled creatively. It was, 'Oh, I do have things I want to say.'"

So Battle and North listened to music, and the director saw moves in his head. Then an opener was needed for the company's virtual gala last June, to be streamed online temporarily, and Battle surprised himself by blurt-ing, "I'll do it!"

"It was low pressure for me," he says with a laugh. "On video, shown once. I didn't think of it as a premiere."

What emerged was "For Four," fast-paced and jittery, the dancers spinning and jumping without stop. That boiling energy comes from the thrill of being back in the

studio, Battle says. Riding that joy, he pushed self-consciousness aside and focused on the dancers.

"I knew the dancers needed this," he says. "That personalized it for me. It was less about my title, more about, 'This is liberating for the dancers.'"

That title. Nice, for sure, but it can get in the way.

"As a director, you have to be in front," he says. "And to make work that is successful, to feel that so much rides on that when you're in front — often I would just say, 'Oh, leave it to the professionals!'" He laughs.

Allowing other artists to create works, and watching them in the studio, he says, "was rewarding, too. I could be a fly on the wall with so many choreographers I know and admire." He names some from whom he has commissioned works over the years: Rennie Harris, Ronald K. Brown, Azure Barton. They've all influenced "For Four," including Alley himself.

"I didn't do that intentionally," Battle says. "It sort of poured out of me, and I didn't stifle it. That allowed me to rediscover my own voice as opposed to who I'm expected to be."

But if performing to expectations weighs on him — keeping Alley afloat, sustaining the legacy — that also distinguishes him as a director, says Elisa Clark, Battle's longtime assistant. She points to his tendency to study others and proceed thoughtfully, as opposed to shining the spotlight on himself.

"When he got the job 10 years ago, he made the choice to listen before he came in with his agenda," says Clark, a former Alley dancer and a founding member of Battleworks, the now-defunct troupe Battle ran for a decade before coming to Alley. Clark teaches Battle's choreography throughout the Alley organization and at other educational institutions.

"If he was a different person, he might have thought, 'Oh, great, now I have a much bigger platform for my work.' But he didn't do that."

"That initial component of listening is literal, in listening to a piece of music, and also receiving information by listening," Clark adds. "And in the studio with the dancers, he's listening, taking in, seeing, 'What do we have here?'"

And that's transferrable to what he's done as a leader, to listen first and then move.

Samantha Figgins, an original dancer in "For Four," relished her time in the studio with Battle, seeing a new side emerge.

"It was almost like he's having visions," she says. "He steps out for a second to see the whole page, like he's having a download of creation. Then the energy in his body is visceral, he jumps back in with a passion, it comes to him and he has to get it out: 'Oh, I have another step for you, try it this way.'"

Still, there were heavy moments, reflecting "all the chaos that's going on in the world," Figgins says. "The BLM movement and the injustices, and how covid has been politicized." "For Four," like many Battle dances, appears carefree on the surface, but there's a dark side.

"I didn't go into the work thinking that I needed to express the racial reckoning that is happening or my response to it," says Battle. "But when I look at the urgency in the work, there's a moment." He describes the opening, when a spotlight captures a dancer soaring out of the darkness into midair — then slamming to the stage floor.

"That is how I felt: We were flying, and all of a sudden, *bam*. When I think of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, there's that sense of being caught, and boom."

At another moment, an American flag appears in the dance, inspired by the flags Battle sees on pickup trucks in Connecticut, where he has a home.

"It's usually not a positive statement," he says. "I started to look at it as more of an attack, in a way. ... This flag has become weaponized in a way that says, 'You don't belong.' That's what it feels like sometimes."

The flag image in his dance ties in with the uproar over Floyd's murder, which all feels like history repeating itself, he says. "I've experienced this before, as a kid," he says. "And any time this happens, I'm reminded of that. It's very personal to me."

He was raised by his great-uncle and his aunt in the Miami neighborhood of Liberty City. (That's where the movie "Moonlight" was filmed, he notes.) Riots erupted there in 1980 after four

ABOVE: Robert Battle, the artistic director of Alvin Alley American Dance Theater, at the Alley Studios in Manhattan in January.

BELOW: From left, Alvin Alley American Dance Theater's Solomon Dumas, Samantha Figgins, Belén Indhira Pereyra and Renaldo Maurice in Battle's "For Four."

White police officers were acquitted in the beating death of a Black insurance agent. They recurred in subsequent years. Amid fires and violence, police closed off the neighborhood.

Battle remembers seeing a local tire company in flames, and can still smell the burning rubber. And he has a vivid recollection of his ballet teacher, Adelaide Munez, coming to his home despite the chaos to haul him to a lesson. She had taken an interest in him, paid for his classes and regularly drove him there.

"Coming to pick me up one day, she hits the police barricade," Battle says. "She yelled at them, 'My student has to go to class!' And they let her through." She arrived at his door, to the surprise of everyone. "You have to go to

class," she told him.

He laughs, long and hard. "There's something powerful in that. You go on. No matter what anybody says."

That spirit is in his new piece. After the dancer in "For Four" falls to the ground, he gets up and walks offstage. But it's no an ordinary walk.

"He does this thing we call tipping, with a lot of attitude, walking on the ball of your foot as if you're in high heels."

"It's the notion that despite all that," says the choreographer, "you're still tipping."

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Alvin Alley American Dance Theater performs four programs of works at the Kennedy Center Opera House Feb. 1-6. kennedy-center.org.



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