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Weekend Confidential: Choreographer Robert Battle Believes That Dance Brings Connection

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things, always fiddling around with movement," he asked Mr. Battle to create a dance for the company. "It was the first time I'd done something like that, and it went very well," Mr. Battle recalls. He says he likes when people notice that his "dances are very musical": "I want people to hear the dance and see the music," he explains. When he choreographs, he prefers to hold the score in his hands, like "it's a personal diary entry."

One commission led to another, and in 2001 he left Parsons to start his own company, Battleworks, which began touring internationally in 2002. Soon Mr. Battle heard he had piqued

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the interest of Ms. Jamison, who was looking for a successor at AADT. He figured the job would go to someone with better connections and a longer resume, but after a lengthy vetting process, Ms. Jamison called him before the search committee, grabbed his arms, looked him in the eyes and said "It's yours."

Mr. Battle admits he felt daunted. Ms. Jamison, who was with Alvin Ailey when he died from an AIDS-related illness in 1989, has long said that his last breath was an inhalation. "It felt like she literally took that last breath and put it in me, that's the weight I felt in that moment," Mr. Battle explains. He was 38 when he assumed the job in 2011.

In his first few years as artistic director, Mr. Battle says the stakes felt higher for everything he did. He noticed that critics were more critical of works they had previously praised, so he decided to curate and commission dances instead of choreographing them himself.

"I realized I needed to take a bigger view of what was needed to move the company forward instead of being consumed by my own artistic expression," he explains. What felt right for AADT was also an act of self-preservation: "I wanted to protect the works that had come out of this shy boy who wanted to share something with his teacher after class."

The pandemic halted the company's touring schedule for nearly two years, but it also gave Mr. Battle the mental space to create. "It was the first time I had spent that much time not on the road, and I could finally hear my voice again," he says. He choreographed "For Four" to an energetic piece of jazz by Wynton Marsalis and was delighted by the experience and the response. "I realized I still had some things to say," he says. "I know I'm right where I'm supposed to be."

Although Ailey founded his dance company in 1958 as a place for Black dancers to tell Black stories, the troupe has been racially integrated since 1963 and enjoys a broad appeal. "There's something of the primordial in dance that connects us at once to the past, the present, the future and to each other," explains Mr. Battle. It helps, he adds, that at a time of intense polarization, dance has the "luxury of ambiguity," which allows viewers of various backgrounds to see themselves in the work. "What we are trying to do is celebrate our common humanity," he says. "Where words fail, dance excels."

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Robert Battle

A choreographer believes that dance brings connection.

Robert Battle was around 13 years old when he first saw dancers perform a work by the pioneering Black choreographer Alvin Ailey. "It was a revelation," he recalls. As a bullied child with artistic ambitions, he found it dazzling to see people who looked like him earn applause for telling the story of the African-American experience through movement. "I understood that what was going on was deeper than entertainment," he says. "They were expressing beauty through the resistance, and I felt a sense of pride."

Never did Mr. Battle imagine that he would one day lead Ailey's company, the internationally acclaimed Alvin Ailey Dance Theater (AADT). "That wasn't even on my radar," he says over video from his home in Manhattan, near the company's midtown studios.

As he celebrates his first decade as AADT's artistic director with a national tour that ends at New York's Lincoln Center this month, Mr. Battle, 49, says he is finally ready to exhale. "I spent a few years always waiting for the other shoe to drop, for someone to find out and go, 'You don't know what you're doing,'" he admits. Although his predecessor, Judith Jamison, told Mr. Battle she handpicked him to lead AADT because of his "singular vision," he says it's only recently

that he learned to trust what's in his head and heart: "Now I'm ready to lean in."

Mr. Battle grew up in a loving but unconventional home in Liberty City, one of the poorest parts of Miami. He never met his father, hardly knew his mother and lost his siblings to foster homes. His great aunt and uncle took him in as a baby, corrected his severely bowed legs with braces and raised him with the help of their daughter, a piano-playing, poetry-reciting aesthete whom he calls "Mom." He learned that the bonds of family could be both strong and mutable. "Perhaps that's why I was always looking for where I belong," he says.

Mr. Battle's earliest ambition as a child was to become a preacher, after he "felt something" when he heard a particularly charismatic one preach: "I thought, 'I want to be like that.'" He memorized sermons and performed them at home "for myself and my imaginary congregation." With hindsight,

he sees that this was his first exposure to the power of stagecraft: "I always say it's not so different from what I do now."

A bright child, Mr. Battle sensed his real education was outside the classroom. His mom introduced him to the poetry of Langston Hughes and Mari Evans, the music of Sarah Vaughn and Nina Simone, and the films of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. He loved them all, "but that kind of stuff got you beat up in Liberty City," he says.

He learned to tolerate being called a "faggot" and "sissy"—"those are the names I can repeat"—and he often carried a hammer to defend himself. Many of the men in his life pushed him to "toughen up," but he knew he was already tough. "I understood why I was looked at as weird, but somewhere inside me was such a determination that I could not be deterred," he says.

One of Mr. Battle's teachers, a pre-

maturely retired ballerina, paid for him to take ballet classes after school and on weekends starting when he was around 12. He recalls asking if he could one day be the "first Black Baryshnikov." She said, "You can be whatever you want to be."

At the New World School of the Arts, a magnet high school in Miami, Mr. Battle found he preferred modern dance for the way it prized "making people feel something" over technique. He also cultivated mentors "who went beyond the classroom and gave me the courage to explore." He planned to stay in Miami for college, but on a whim he went to a local audition for Julliard, and the school lured him to New York by offering to cover his tuition and housing costs. "It was thrilling," he says.

Upon graduating in 1994, Mr. Battle secured a coveted spot in the Parsons Dance Company. When the troupe's choreographer, David Parsons, noticed he was "always making