

# DANCE

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DECEMBER 2013

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## AILEY NOW

ROBERT BATTLE'S  
VISION

THE 2013  
DANCE  
MAGAZINE  
AWARDS

Jamar Roberts and  
Rachael McLaren

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# THE NEW AILEY

FROM MCGREGOR TO BARTON, ROBERT BATTLE IS PUSHING THE

**There isn't much** that seems to pose a serious challenge to Jamar Roberts. At 6' 4", with the uncanny ability to shape energy to its most attractive or powerful or luscious impact, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater dancer has given unforgettable performances of Alvin Ailey's lyrical *Night Creature*, Robert Battle's tortured tour-de-force *In/Side*, and Ronald K. Brown's fervent *Grace*. But, as he recalls, upon seeing Wayne McGregor's *Chroma*, his first thought was a panicked, "How am I going to do this?"

On December 4, *Chroma* will have its New York premiere at New York City Center—danced not by one of America's major ballet companies, or The Royal Ballet, for whom it was made, but by Ailey. For many audience members on the company's upcoming 23-city North American tour, it will also be their first opportunity to see the ballet, an epic assault of bodies stretched to their limit. Artistic director Robert Battle is sending a clear message: His dancers can do anything—their way.

"What I love about this company is that we all have something distinctive to give," says Rachael McLaren, a dancer of luminous clarity. Under Battle, the Ailey repertoire has branched out considerably. Battle's programming choices reveal how superb Horton technique and soulful theatricality, coupled with individual strengths—the ferocious energy of Ghrai DeVore, the elegant line of Antonio Douthit-Boyd, the regal self-possession of Linda Celeste Sims—illuminate the works of Jirí Kylián, Rennie Harris, Kyle Abraham, and Paul Taylor anew—sometimes several of them in one evening. The shift not only allows

the different facets of the dancers' artistry to shine, but the works themselves—the musical phrasing, the group dynamics, the visceral impact—take on a new light.

In addition to the new rep, one third of the 30-member company has also been brought in by Battle. "The company is a lot more open, because younger people are like that—they're not so set in their ways," says Roberts. "And Robert is offering a rep where you have to be completely open to transforming yourself, which creates a really good energy."

For the 2013–14 season, which includes a return visit to Lincoln Center's Koch Theater next summer, Battle has also acquired Bill T. Jones' exhilarating *D-Man in the Waters (Part I)* and commissioned a new work from Aszure Barton, plus new productions of Alvin Ailey's *The River*, made for American Ballet Theatre in 1970, and *Pas de Duke*, Ailey's 1976 showstopper for Judith Jamison and Baryshnikov. The mix is meant to energize audiences and dancers alike. "Some of it is looking at how does this work with the history of the company—how does it work with it by sometimes working against it?" says Battle. "That contrast is interesting, where it's unexpected but totally right."

"It's great that Robert wants to push us as much as our audience," says McLaren. "And I trust him. He's able to see this bigger picture, the greater arc. It's funny, we're a repertory company and we're expected to be able to do so many different things. But it's kind of easy to forget *how* capable you are unless you're really pushed and pulled in these directions."

Battle deflects praise for his expansive vision. "I don't know what else I would do," he says

BY KINA POON



COMPANY INTO FRESH TERRITORY.



Jayne Thornton

Jamar Roberts and  
Rachael McLaren  
performing *LIFT*, Azure  
Barton's first work for  
the company

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"They're skilled, they're smart, they're passionate. Their bodies are absolutely insane."

—Aszure Barton



Above: The company runs through Barton's *LIFT*; for five weeks, the company worked on phrases like "tornado" and "cry." Below left: Linda Celeste Sims and Antonio Douthit-Boyd in *Chroma*.



with a shrug. "This is the stuff I like. I can see or hear myself in Richard Strauss' *Salome* as much as I can in Thelonious Monk. That was always nurtured in me, and so I'm still sort of that young child, switching my soundtrack."

Relating his choices to the company, "it also goes back to Alvin Ailey himself," says Battle. "This is an artist, a genius who was trying to express something personal. He *had* to be a black choreographer because of the times in which we lived—that's the way he was looked at. As I say all the time: I am a human being, nothing human can be alien to me. That's what he and so many other trailblazers were trying to say: We should only be limited by our imagination. In some ways, that struggle of perception still exists. But it also gives me a wonderful platform to express things that are 'unexpected.' And in that way, his legacy and Judith Jamison's vision are tied in with my vision—the sky's the limit."

With that mindset, Battle commissioned a premiere from Aszure Barton, known for her innovative, sometimes outlandish, choreography, whom he first met as the kid sister of one of his Juilliard classmates. Barton's *LIFT*, set to an original percussive score by Curtis Macdonald, shows off the Ailey dancers' rhythmic dexterity and dynamism, deployed to haunting effect. "She came in with a blank slate and we basically had to help her create this whole thing from scratch, which is really cool," says Roberts, who eventually became the work's central dancer. Over five weeks, the entire company



worked, at first without casting, on phrases with names like “tornado,” “cora,” and “cry.” Any dancer could be called upon at a moment’s notice for Barton to see how a sequence would look on one individual or as part of a group.

Battle places casting decisions fully in the hands of the choreographers and staggers—although he and Masazumi Chaya, the company’s indispensable associate artistic director, will answer any questions they may have. Between the dancemakers and the dancers, he says, “I try and create a happy collision, and then get out of the way and watch it unfold.”

“I like that let’s-explore-together kind of feel,” says McLaren about Barton’s creative mode. “It wasn’t like, ‘You need to get it right now, and if you don’t get it, I’m going to be frustrated.’ It was ‘I see *you* and you are enough. Let’s create.’ I think the work of the professional is understanding that it’s OK to be imperfect, to give yourself to the movement. Dancing is about allowing your vulnerability to speak in ways that audience members can see.”

The tension created by that duality of vulnerability and force is what makes the Ailey dancers so captivating. Says Barton, “Their bodies are absolutely insane. They’re skilled, they’re smart, and they’re passionate—they have this sacred understanding of something much bigger. And they’re a real community. They just opened their door and said welcome.”

These characteristics are only enhanced by the amount of time the company spends together—this year, the company toured 15 straight weeks across the U.S., plus three weeks in South America. At home in their studios, with wall-to-wall windows overlooking the Manhattan skyline, the dancers take company class each morning, taught by different teachers from around New York City, before rehearsing from 12:00 to 7:00 (broken up by an hour lunch break at 3:00 and rigorously enforced five-minute breaks every



**“We should only be limited by our imagination.”**

**—Robert Battle**

Taking Ailey in fresh directions: Artistic director Robert Battle.



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## Rachael McLaren

Through her innate sense of line and her spellbinding eyes, the radiant Rachael McLaren draws you deep into her performances. The Manitoba native began ballet at age 5 at the Royal Dance Conservatory in Winnipeg before moving to the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School at 11. Despite auditioning several times for RWBS’ professional division, she was never accepted. “Unfortunately, I don’t really have that ballet aesthetic,” she says. Upon high school graduation, McLaren auditioned for *Mamma Mia!* in Toronto and booked the gig. However, her teacher at RWBS, Jacqui Davidson, encouraged her to also audition for Ailey’s summer program. She was accepted and, in her words, “my mind was totally blown.” That feeling stuck with her during her two years with *Mamma Mia!*, so she returned to The Ailey School afterwards—and has been with Ailey ever since.

McLaren, 27, adapts her routine outside of the studio to the current demands of her rep. “You totally have to shift your focus and get into a different frame of mind.” She loves to cook—as a pescetarian, she eats a primarily plant-based diet supplemented with a daily multivitamin and probiotic.

This season, she’s taken up swimming—“for strength, flexibility in my joints, and stamina”—in addition to yoga, which she practices religiously. “I try to wear many hats,” she says, “so I can express myself in a genuine way.”

Jayne Thornton

hour). It's common for three casts of dancers to be run-through ready in a week and a half—which was the case for Bill T. Jones' masterwork *D-Man in the Waters (Part I)*. The innocence, momentum, and supreme athleticism of *D-Man* (which the Ailey dancers possess in abundance) are belied by the tragic circumstances of its creation. (Jones carried dancer Demian Acquavella through the work during its premiere; when Acquavella died of AIDS a year later, he was not replaced.) “*D-Man* is intense, but there's joy and liberation in that struggle,” says McLaren. “I think it's going to be one of those pieces that will keep our spirits up on tour.”

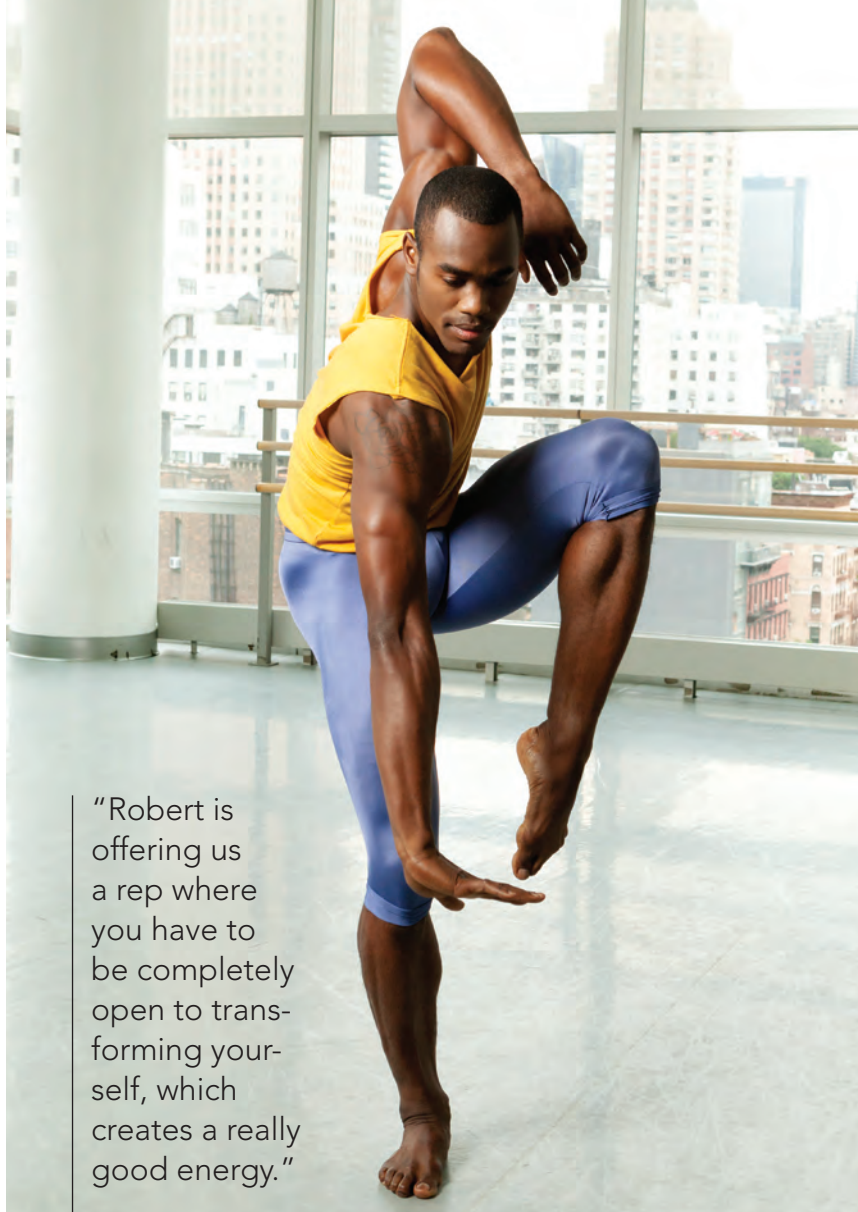
During an early rehearsal, Roberts (in bright pink pants, one of the few dancers dressed brightly) is marking his solo in a corner, blocking out the organized chaos around him, as other dancers, including McLaren, work through the piece's lifts, many of which have the women supporting the men. Socks are the footwear of choice for most in the room (the piece will be performed barefoot)—sometimes, for especially high-impact pieces, the dancers rehearse in brightly colored sneakers. The music for *Revelations* drifts into the studio from another downstairs, and the dancers, for whom that piece must be like breathing at this point, smile at each other knowingly.

Both McLaren and Roberts mention Ronald K. Brown as another choreographer whose works they find rejuvenating—“there's always something to grab onto because you know what each individual step means,” says Roberts. Ailey's works are also favorites—McLaren hopes to perform his *Masekela Language* someday, while Roberts says, “I don't remember a time when I didn't love to do *Revelations*.” Both want more Ohad Naharin and Gaga. “Gaga classes are about exploring. How far can you go?” says McLaren. “How big is your mind? I like that idea of taking off your skin, opening yourself up, and seeing what you're really made of.”

As for future additions to the rep, the possibilities are endless. Roberts cites Akram Khan and Pina Bausch as choreographers whose work he would love to dance. McLaren picks Hofesh Shechter, and Roberts himself, who has been quietly working on his own choreography.

That these wishes fall squarely in the realm of possibility for the Ailey company comes back to Battle's understanding of how interconnected the dance world is. “There are choreographers who have been such a part of the legacy of modern dance—trailblazers who are imitated and emulated—that I feel are so important to *now*. Maybe, in the future, they will be right. I'm very much excited by history in that way—how are we repeating it, reinventing it, repurposing it. In some ways, I'm trying to create the space for things to happen that maybe I can't even imagine.”

*Kina Poon is a dance writer and former Dance Magazine associate editor.*



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## Jamar Roberts

“I do have a lot of energy. People are always like, What are you on?” says Jamar Roberts. In solo roles, he often manages to Jamar-ify them, dominating the stage, no matter how wild the musicality, the movement texture, or sheer physical demand. His natural instinct for movement lives in “musicality and sensual things that I try and grab onto.” Robert Battle calls him a gentle giant (which happens to be Roberts' Instagram bio, too).

Born in Miami, Roberts trained at the Dance Empire of Miami and the New World School of the Arts. “I never thought I would be a dancer—I didn't know what that was,” he says. “I didn't have much money, but I wanted to go to dance class. I think I was so in those classes, so focused, that I couldn't see what was ahead of me.”

At 18, after less than a month at The Ailey School, he was invited to join Ailey II and then, the following year, the main company. He took two season-long hiatuses from Ailey—the first in 2004, to pursue fashion design at Fashion Institute of Technology and then another in 2011. Once outside the studio, he says, “I try to get out of that dance space. I'm reading, I'm drawing, I'm painting, I'm going to museums.” He continues, “You have to do whatever you need to do to get through. You go to whatever extremes for a decent performance—it sounds really crazy but it's true.”

Jayme Thornton