

A Miami Awakening

A new Alvin Ailey dance performance is brought to life by a fascinating young man from Goulds.

BY NICOLE MARTINEZ

After a long day's work, most people like to plop down in front of the TV to unwind — but not Jamar Roberts.

The 33-year-old dancer, choreographer, illustrator, and fashion designer considers the act of watching television an exploration of what's happening behind the lens. "I usually watch on mute because I feel like when you take away the sound and the crazy voices, you can see all the flaws and you end up laughing a lot," Roberts says. "It's much more interesting to look at a tree and see negative space between the branches than to just see a tree."

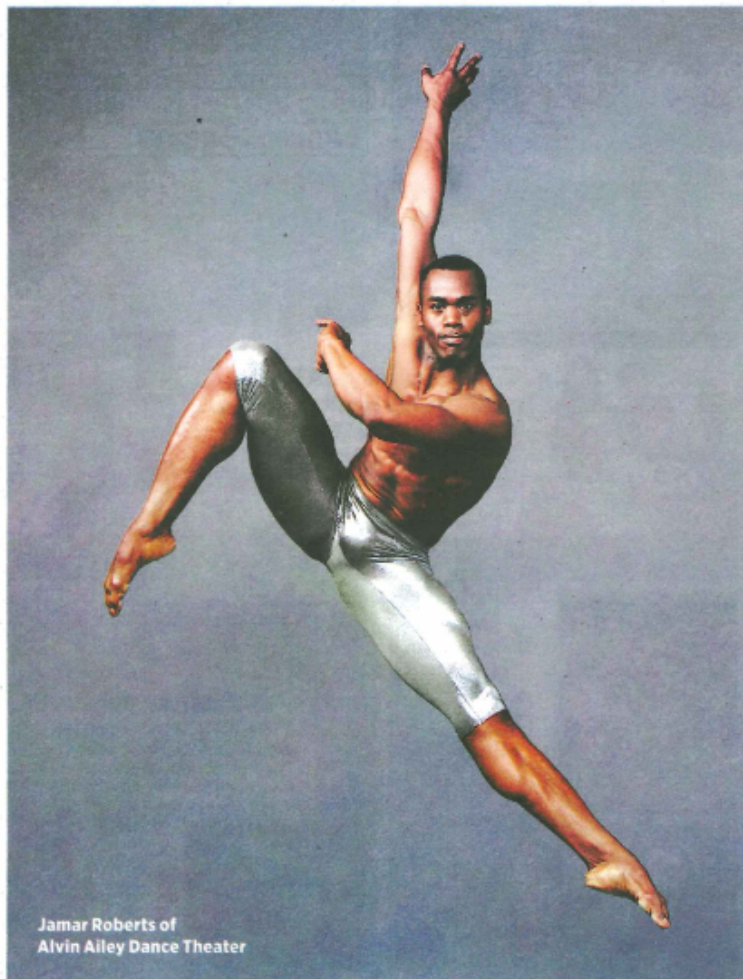
This need to explore has led Roberts to blast through every obstacle. As a child born into the mean streets of Goulds, he took illustration classes and yearned to join the dance team. Later, as a talented member of the legendary Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, he left for a time to pursue a degree in fashion. Inquisitive and introspective, Roberts returns to his native Miami-Dade this weekend in a lead role in *Awakening*, a work created by Alvin Ailey artistic director Robert Battle, also a South Florida native.

It's a homecoming for both dancer and director. Battle was raised in Liberty City, and he and Roberts graduated from the New World School of the Arts. *Awakening* was co-commissioned by the Adrienne Arsht Center in celebration of its tenth anniversary and is the centerpiece of a weekend of performances and workshops.

Premiering his first new work as director of one of the nation's most significant dance companies — a job he took five years ago — Battle cast Roberts in a role the dancer has unknowingly been preparing for since the birth of his young career.

Roberts maintains a street sensibility despite having reached the pinnacle of his field. Growing up in a poor family in Goulds, one of Southwest Miami-Dade's roughest crime-ridden areas, Roberts lived with a mother who stayed at home while his father worked at an auto paint and body shop. But his dad was also a painter who in high school had designed the costumes for his "club dance" group. In his spare time, his father liked to fix up cars and bicycles and build tool sheds. "We were similar in the sense that he could do a lot of different things without a ton of education," Roberts says, "and do them beautifully and perfectly."

Roberts began his career as a dancer after Hurricane Andrew rocked his hometown in 1992. He and his family moved around quite a bit, getting as far as Jacksonville while Roberts was in fifth grade. "That's why this all happened, because we moved to Jacksonville," he jokes, recounting how he first dabbled in dance. "I had a neighbor



Jamar Roberts of
Alvin Ailey Dance Theater

Photo by Andrew Eccles

who was in an after-school dance program, and they needed boys. It wasn't anything formal — for the most part, we were just dancing to Mariah Carey in tutus."

A year later, the family moved back to Miami-Dade, where Roberts enrolled in Mays Middle School, which offered a magnet program for visual arts, music, theater, and dance. At the time, Roberts was focused on drawing, but after watching the dance team perform at a school assembly, he decided to switch programs. Often forging signatures on permission slips for after-school programs, Roberts kept his interest in dance quiet. "My family was poor, and they were always mad and stressed out and yelling about some shit, and I just assumed that dance was the last thing they wanted to hear about," he says.

Roberts was accepted to New World School of the Arts in 11th grade. "I never wanted to be a dancer, and for a long time

I wasn't even sure if I loved it," he says. "I think I grew up in a place that was so shitty that it seemed sort of impossible to become something. Like someone wouldn't say, 'Oh, I want to be a fireman,' because if you looked around, no one you knew was a fireman. You just didn't dream like that."

Even after watching his first Alvin Ailey Dance Theater performance — an experience Roberts says was "revolutionary because it was the first time I saw black men dancing onstage" — he still wasn't sure whether becoming a professional dancer was his dream. A teacher at New World had insisted that Roberts apply to Ailey II, the company's program for young dancers. At age 18, he packed up and moved to New York. He was offered a position with the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater in 2003.

Despite this monumental achievement, Roberts was plagued by doubt. "This whole time, I had just been dancing for fun," he

says. "It wasn't until I was well into the company that I had all these questions about whether this was actually what I wanted to do." Sketching fashion illustrations in his spare time, Roberts decided to enroll in the Fashion Institute of Technology to pursue a degree in fashion design and, perhaps, a new calling. Within a year, he was back with Ailey. "Having time off gave me a better understanding of who I was," he says, adding that "dance has a way of consuming you."

According to Battle, Roberts' inability to accept his talent at face value is exactly what's driven him to become a remarkable dancer. "He's truly a renaissance man. He's always trying new things, and that only stretches his dancing," Battle says. He formally met Roberts in 2011, when Battle became the company's director, and instantly recognized himself in the young dancer. "I related to his curiosity, to his sense of imagination," he says. "When I was a kid, it wasn't enough for me to listen to my grandpa's tape recorder; eventually I would get a screwdriver and destroy it so I could understand how it worked. That sense of investigation is the lifeblood of a creative artist, and it's the impetus that drove me to cast Jamar in *Awakening*."

For *Awakening*, Battle needed to cast a dancer whose dual nature allowed the audience to explore the nuances of power. "When we see somebody of size, we only think about their ability to overpower us, without considering that person's vulnerability," he says. "At 6'4", Jamar's height and size is rare, but he's also extremely sensitive in his movement in a way that's a contrast to his largeness. *Awakening* is really about that, being both bold and cautious, fearful yet daring."

Awakening features a dozen dancers trapped in a state of turmoil and chaos. Roberts is born out of the chaos, a leader in a community of others, representing the hope the ensemble needs to pull itself from the rubble. Battle's taut, ritualistic choreography has impressed the current troupe — dancers say they're "especially excited" to dance the piece this weekend.

Today, Roberts continues to dabble in choreography and costume design in his spare time. And though his inability to commit to any one medium may seem like a lack of focus, such eagerness to imagine and explore will only propel his rise to artistry. "A person like Jamar will always grow, whatever he chooses to do," Battle says, "because he will always continue to investigate."

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Awakening

Alvin Ailey Dance Theater will present a series of performances and workshops Thursday, February 18, through Sunday, February 21, at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, 1300 Biscayne Blvd. Miami. For tickets, visit arshtcenter.org.