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## TROPICAL LIFE

Alvin Ailey dance troupe keeps wrestling with race 1C



## DANCE

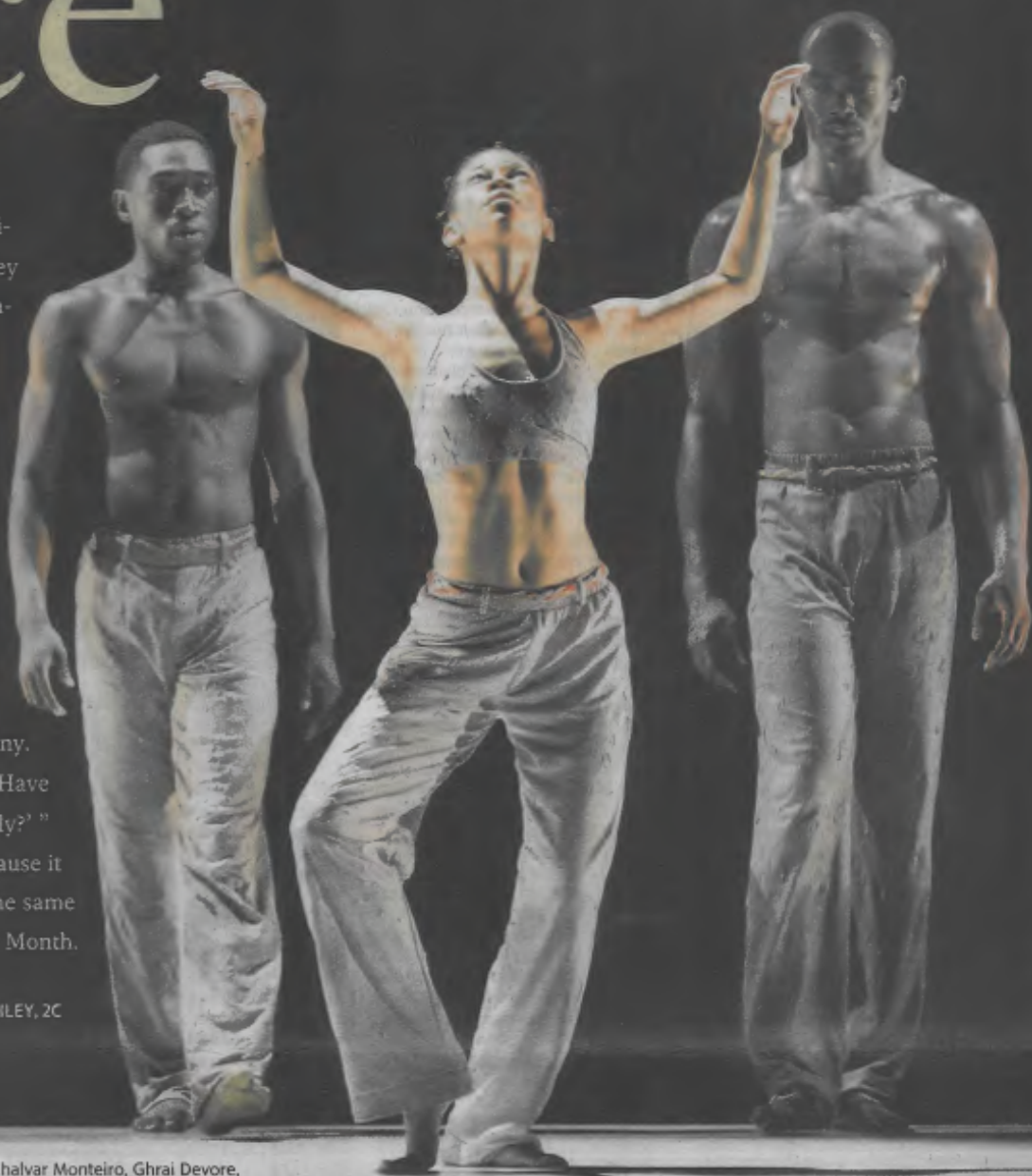
# An iconic black troupe keeps wrestling with race

BY JORDAN LEVIN  
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Robert Battle, artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, was prepping for an interview a few years ago and figured that, as head of a storied African-American troupe, he'd be asked yet again about black dance. So he called longtime mentor Carolyn Adams, one of modern dance's few black performers during her time with the Paul Taylor Dance Company.

"We said no one ever says, 'Have you seen any white dance lately?'" says Battle. "We laughed, because it is kind of ridiculous. But it's the same way I feel about Black History Month.

SEE AILEY, 2C



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Chalvar Monteiro, Ghrai Devore, and Jamar Roberts in Kyle Abraham's 'Untitled America.'

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# AILEY

On the one hand I celebrate it, and on the other hand you're reminded that you still need to have a single month in the year for black history."

The question of what it means to be a black dance company is newly relevant for the Ailey troupe, which makes its annual stop at the Adrienne Arsht Center Thursday through Sunday. Since choreographer Alvin Ailey launched his New York-based company in the heat of the civil rights movement in 1958, its popularity and success have made it an emblem of African-American achievement, and of how far this country had come on race. President Barack Obama's family often attended the troupe's shows in Washington. Performances of Ailey's beloved "Revelations" seemed more celebration than a necessary manifestation of black humanity.

But more recently, the Black Lives Matter movement, debates over incarceration, racially-driven police brutality, and what many see as divisive rhetoric during President Donald Trump's campaign and in his administration, have made race a fraught and current issue again.

For Battle and the Ailey troupe, the shift raises a number of questions. Do they have a renewed responsibility to present dances that address civil rights and black identity? Do they simply do the best work they can, with the idea that speaks for itself? How much should the company continue to be shaped by being a black dance troupe?

"There's this conundrum," admits Battle, who was raised in Miami's Liberty City and went to Northwestern Senior High School and the New World School of the Arts. "I have a responsibility to shine a light on some of those

issues, because of what the company represents. We have to find ways to hold a mirror to society. But I also feel strongly that each individual should be able to make the work they want."

The company's Miami shows represent a range of responses. They include Swedish choreographer Johan Inger's "Walking Mad," set to Ravel's "Bolero," in which a wall on stage represents relationship barriers; and Italian ballet maker Mauro Bigonzetti's "Deep" (with music by French-Cuban world music darlings Ibeyi.) Those choices stem from Battle's effort to show the troupe has as much right to sleek, ballet-infused post-modernism as anyone, inspired partly by a youth in which he learned to love Chopin and Ella Fitzgerald, Shakespeare and Maya Angelou. (Battle's "Ella," a duo set to Fitzgerald's music, is also on the program.)

"People go 'Wow, that was unexpected.' Well why was it unexpected?" says Battle. "I'm very much aware of how this would be perceived on the Ailey company, on black bodies, and what that would say about the history of this country. ... What it says to the little black girl going, 'Wow, I want to be beautiful like that.'"

But they'll also do two new, explicitly issue based, high-profile commissions: Kyle Abraham's "Untitled America," which focuses on how the prison system affects African-American families; and company member Hope Boykin's "r-Evolution, Dream," inspired by the sermons and speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Abraham, a MacArthur "Genius" grant winner whose company has performed twice in Miami, has mixed feelings about the way his race affects how he's seen as an artist. "One of the frustrations of being a black dance maker is that's always going to be the lens," he says. "Peo-

## If You Go

**What:** Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

**When:** 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday

**Where:** Adrienne Arsht Center, 1300 Biscayne Blvd., Miami

**Info:** \$29 to \$125 at [arshtcenter.org](http://arshtcenter.org) or 305-949-6722

ple may try to make a connection to race or racial injustice in a way they may not with my white counterparts. But I take full ownership of who I am and the role of race in my life."

Members of Abraham's family and of his friends' families have spent time in prison, and Abraham had been thinking about a piece on incarceration for a long time. That the disproportionate percentage of blacks in the prison system has become a hot topic, or that social media and smartphone videos have lit up public debate over police killings, is secondary.

"My work was looking at these things well before Black Lives Matter caught on," Abraham says. "The work I'm making and have been making is part of our history. What's changed, what hasn't, and how can we be part of that change?"

For Boykin, who calls herself "a light at the end of the tunnel type girl," it's the "evolution" part of the title she pronounces "revolution" that is paramount. She was inspired by recordings of King's speeches and sermons during a visit to the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta. (An original score by jazz musician Ali Jackson incorporates a recording of Leslie Odom Jr., the original Aaron Burr in "Hamilton," reading King's words.) But Boykin was also moved by stories



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Matthew Rushing and Rachael McLaren in Hope Boykin's "r-Evolution, Dream," inspired by Martin Luther King Jr.

of her family in the South: a grandfather who lived under Jim Crow and a great-grandmother who left her own children to care for a white family. "They spoke to me and the kind of person I am," Boykin says. "I like to move to the sound of [King's] voice, and the message moved me in my spirit. It seemed so relevant now. His constant fight toward freedom,

equality, the entire civil rights movement. Movements don't just end, they continue."

"We are a product of our environment. If we're artists, we have to speak to what's around us."

Alvin Ailey started his troupe in 1958 to show the full humanity of African Americans in a culture that mostly portrayed them in racist stereotypes, when it showed them at all. If that

mission, like Black History Month, remains frustratingly relevant, so does the inspiration at the company's heart.

"The truth is liberating," says Battle. "That stuff really gets my juices flowing because it's aspirational. The arts can bridge the gap between culture and class and bring people together."

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