

Back to his roots: Alvin Ailey troupe's Miami director deepens connections to his home town

By Jordan Levin
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In the last five years, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's annual performances have become a highlight for dance and performing arts lovers. But for growing numbers of Miami-Dade schoolchildren and aspiring young artists, the troupe has become something more: a source of pride, inspiration and hope as the company builds its connections to Miami.

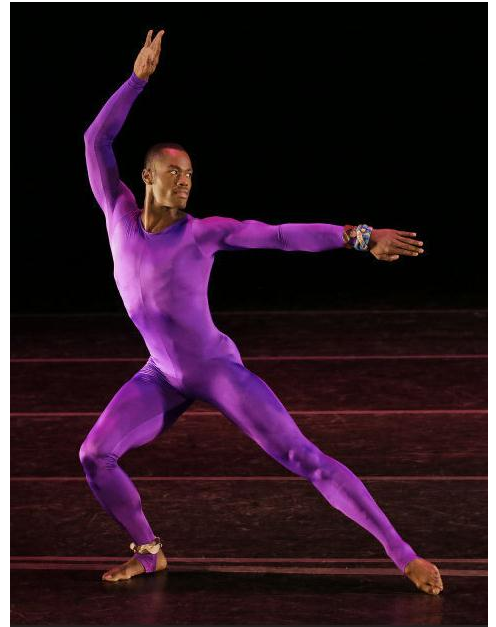
That is largely due to artistic director Robert Battle, a graduate of New World School of the Arts raised in Liberty City, who is strengthening connections between the world-famous troupe he began leading in 2011 and the city that, in many ways, still drives and inspires him.

"It feels so cathartic when we're there that I thought it would be great to be there longer and have more of a presence," Battle said from Washington, D.C., where the troupe was performing at the Kennedy Center on the tour that will bring them to the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts Thursday through Sunday. "It's connected to that feeling of giving back, and it feels direct in Miami because it's so connected to my roots."

In addition to their regular shows, the Ailey troupe will do weeklong residencies at Charles Drew Middle School in Liberty City and South Dade Senior High School in Homestead. Ailey dancers, including New World School of the Arts graduate Jamar Roberts, will teach master classes at New World and the Arsht Center. On Friday morning, the company will give its first performance just for Miami-Dade public school students, with more than 2,000 being bused in for the show (much like the field trip that enabled Battle to see the company for the first time when he was 14). A number of them will be graduates of Ailey Camp, the summer program for middle school students that teaches discipline and self-esteem along with jazz and modern dance, also in its fifth year in Miami.

For the 21 aspiring girl dancers in the Revelations Residency at Charles Drew, learning firsthand from the Ailey company is a powerful experience. One recent morning session, led by former Ailey dancer Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, included a short technique class and practicing the yearning *I Wanna Be Ready* solo from Alvin Ailey's famed gospel dance *Revelations*. But Thomas-Schmitt demands more than even that intense physical effort. The girls add "focus" and "inspiration" to a list of words that represent dance to them, from "passion" and "discipline" to "streets" and "Beyonce." They work on a poem and choreographing a dance. They discuss a biography of Ailey, with Thomas-Schmitt drawing connections to his life and theirs; he went to church on Sundays, was raised by a single mother, discovered dance on a school field trip.

"The important thing for them is to look at this man and see parallels in their own life," Thomas-Schmitt says. "A lot of these young people are told they can't do things. ... We give them a platform to have a voice and be heard."



The parallels these girls feel to the company's current director are even more powerful. He grew up in their neighborhood. And they are all the more impressed by what he's done because he has brought that success home to them.

"It makes me feel proud to be from Miami," says eighth-grader Taelor Dalton, 13. "Knowing that someone from here who became famous in New York, that he's remembering where he came from and trying to give something back in dance."

"It makes me think that no matter what your background you can make it," says Jazmine Edgecomb, 14, also in eighth grade. "If someone from New York came to me and said, 'What's Miami have?' I can finally say, 'Don't say I can't make it. Because Robert Battle came from here.'"

Battle's memories

For Battle, inspiring girls like Jazmine and Taelor and confronting memories of his own struggles in Miami are both reasons to return. A choir singer and piano student before he started dancing in Northwestern High School's arts magnet program — which many of the Charles Drew dance students will attend — Battle was shy and often bullied. He studied martial arts and put a hammer in the dance bag he carried walking to school through some of Liberty City's worst neighborhoods. That tension is still visible in his choreography for dances like *Strange Humors*, an intense, symbiotic male duo the troupe will perform in Miami, and *The Hunt*, a fiercely bellicose dance for six men.

But Battle's memories of the mentors who fostered him at Northwestern and New World are just as powerful as those of isolation and fearfulness. In bringing Ailey's resources to Miami, he is both proclaiming his triumph and assuring others they can succeed too.

"It's yes, me, and you can too," Battle says. "All those memories are there rooted in Miami. ... The fears, the tenaciousness, the curiosity — I didn't leave it behind. Something about coming home again is not only invigorating but totally necessary. I think when you lose those roots and turn your back on even the painful part, you in essence lose yourself. I can't do that and be a leader for anyone. So it's both selfish and selfless."

The Ailey company will perform several new pieces in Miami that show how Battle is beginning to put his stamp on the troupe. One is *Petite Mort*, by European contemporary ballet choreographer Jiri Kylian, a witty, sexy dance that attracted Battle in part because he thought it would let the dancers show a new side of themselves — and to put their own, weightier stamp on the neo-classical choreography. Another is *From Before*, an abstract modern dance by iconoclast Garth Fagan, which drew Battle for the way it confounded assumptions about the Jamaican choreographer's work.

"When you hear about [Fagan's] background, that has expectations around it," Battle says. "I feel he's defied those expectations by being himself."

'Something more'

Jamar Roberts, who will teach one of three master classes led by Ailey dancers this week, didn't have Battle's struggles. A prodigious natural talent and imposing figure who joined the troupe just over a year after graduating from New World's high school in 2000, Roberts has been one of the company's stars. But he still feels connected to his hometown.



“I do feel a sense of community and almost responsibility to show the younger kids in Miami there’s something more out there,” Roberts says. “I’m sure they all have their own dreams. But I think it’s important to have someone in front of them who’s gone from point A to point B.”

Roberts is one of a stream of New World graduates who have danced with Ailey over the years — at one point a third of the troupe came from the Miami arts conservatory — part of a longtime Miami-Ailey connection that helped lead to the choice of Battle as director. But Thomas-Schmitt, who also heads the AileyCamp program, thinks the city is ready for much more. Last summer, 500 kids applied in one day for the 150 slots at the Ailey camp.



“Young people here are very hungry,” Thomas-Schmitt says. “They’ve got a great spirit. They are excited to learn, and they’ve got personality. ... They have a lot to say.”

The Arsht Center, which is co-producing the student performance, has helped foster the company’s Miami connections by hosting AileyCamp for six weeks each summer.

Arsht Center President John Richard says Battle’s position has increased the popularity of a troupe that regularly sells out its shows here. “There is now this pride that Miami’s own is leading this incredible company,” Richard says. “Robert is a living example of attaining the highest level of accomplishment. That’s important for kids to see and know.”

Battle says he hopes to increase the company’s Miami presence, mentioning more master classes, community outreach, open rehearsals and Revelations Residencies at a different time of year (plans for a residency at a third school had to be put aside because of FCAT preparations).

“There’s a lot of connective tissue,” he says. “It’s too early to say, but I’m open to figuring out new ways to engage.”