

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Robert Battle: 'I Was a Boy Surrounded By the Arts'

December 5, 2013
By Dotson Rader

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is the most popular American dance company in the world. It has performed to rave reviews and tens of millions of people throughout the United States and in 71 countries. Awarded the National Medal for the Arts in 2001, it was declared “Cultural Ambassador to the World” by the U.S. Congress. Founded in 1958 as a multiracial repertory dance group by the great African-American choreographer, the late Alvin Ailey, it continues to profoundly influence modern dance.



(Andrew Eccles)

Parade contributing editor Dotson Rader interviewed renowned dancer-choreographer Robert Battle, the company’s director since 2011, at Ailey’s magnificent dance center in Manhattan’s theater district. The modern building, bustling with activity, is the site of Ailey’s schools, rehearsal halls, studios, theater, and other dance facilities. Battle, 41, spoke movingly about his journey from a childhood of abandonment, poverty, and infirmity to become the leader of one of the world’s most important performing arts institutions.

During the Cold War, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was one of the first American dance companies to receive State Department sponsorship. When you go abroad today, what is the message that you carry to other countries? “Performing abroad is ambassadorial. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre is very much tied into the American story. It isn’t only about seeing a well-executed [dance] movement; it is about feeling something, too, connecting to people. It’s about real subject matter, homelessness, for example. It isn’t about a swan or something else that’s hard to connect with.”

How do foreign audiences respond?
“People literally dance in the aisles. It’s stunning to see.”

Your audiences do that in America, too. Why?
“It’s very visceral, like American jazz [was]. People didn’t just sit and listen to jazz—they danced to it. They connected. That was what Mr. Ailey meant when he said dance comes from the people and should be delivered back to the people—because you’re dancing their stories.”

When you audition new dancers, what do you look for?



(Andrew Eccles)

“I look for versatility. It’s hard to do what our dancers do. I look for dancers who have a necessity to speak through their bodies to tell some truth about themselves, and about the work, every time they go onstage. That’s why people relate to the dancers, because they feel that impatient urgency to say something through movement.”

You grew up in the Liberty City slum in Miami, and were abandoned by your mother as a toddler.
“There’s a part of me that never felt my mother abandoned me. I always felt that she did the right thing.”

For you or for her?
“For me. The reason I’m grateful for what she did is because it set me on this path.”

When she abandoned you, who took care of you?

“My great-aunt and -uncle took me in. They got me braces for my legs [Battle was born bowlegged]. When my great-aunt died, in 1979, my cousin, Desilie, took me in. She was an English teacher. She had a [theater] performance group. They sang and did skits. To watch her was so magical to me. I was a boy surrounded by the arts.”

When did you decide to be a dancer?

“Desilie loved dance. What she liked, I liked, partly to please her. The dance happened [because] my friend was taking dance in school. He taught me stuff he was learning in dance class, like a plié. I was about 12. I wanted to be an Ailey dancer. I would watch Alvin Ailey videos over and over, and I’d picture myself doing that. I was obsessed with it.”



(Andrew Eccles)

You grew up poor in a tough ghetto. There are still barriers of class and race that can discourage talented young people from careers as dancers. What can be done to help overcome those barriers?

“Doing that has always been a mission of the [Ailey] company. We’re not just a dance company. We have the school. We have Arts in Education programs. We do real things to make sure that we don’t leave anyone out.”

How do kids find their way to you?

“We have Ailey summer day camps for, quote-unquote, ‘at-risk youth.’ They learn dance, problem solving, music, and poetry. They have experiences they never dreamed possible.”

How does a kid become part of that?

“You audition. It’s not an audition like we would have for dancers because the kids don’t know dance. But they write and get interviewed.”

You went to the High School for the Arts in Miami, and then you went on to the Juilliard School at Lincoln Center.

“I never expected to go to Juilliard. When they came recruiting in Miami, I auditioned. I got a scholarship. So, there I am in New York City, at Juilliard, in 1990. Desilie told me, ‘Don’t look up at the buildings. People will know you’re not from New York. Put a chair under your door!’ [laughs] In the summer I studied at the Ailey summer program.”

You started creating your own choreography soon after graduating Juilliard in 1994.

“I was 22. I’d go make stuff. I stopped dancing in 2001 because my choreography work was taking over.”

How did your dances come to be performed by Alvin Ailey Two, the second company?

“Judith Jamison [then director of Alvin Ailey] saw my work and in 2003 asked me to [create] a dance. My dream was choreographing Ailey. All I cared about was doing a good enough job to be invited back.”

A lot of dancers seem to burn out. Nijinsky did, Michael Jackson. They seemed fragile, like flowers that open and then the petals fall away and they are left defenseless. If you were a parent with a child of 8 or 9 who wanted to be a dancer, would you think it is worth the risk?

“Yes. I’m thinking myself as a young boy. Dance was such an obsession, such a necessity, that I never felt there was another option. There wasn’t for my family. I was going to do this. Luckily, they supported it, but if they hadn’t, I would’ve found a way to be the person I wanted to be.”

It was inevitable?

“When young people ask, ‘How can I do it?’, I say, ‘Start where you are. You’re already a dancer. Now, just get on with the business of doing it. Don’t separate the dancer and the dance. You are it.’”

It takes courage, don’t you think?

“I remember somebody was saying to me, ‘It’s not easy. What are you going to fall back on?’ I said, ‘If I want something to fall back on, I’ll get an easy chair.’ I went onto this journey believing that this is who I am. From the bowlegs to the straight legs with the braces, to people taking me in, to people who said they believed in me, like my piano teacher. When

I was at Julliard, and she was dying of cancer, she took me shopping and bought me five suits. She said, 'He's going to be meeting kings and presidents, so he's going to need suits.'"

Where are your hopes for Alvin Ailey Dance Theater 10 years from now?

"That it continues to grow and continues to speak to the human spirit. There are nine cities of Ailey Camp; there needs to be 50. The notion that one is only limited by one's own imagination—that anything is possible—that is what this company represents. I want to make sure that that continues as we move into the future. We're constantly looking for what is on the horizon. To me, that tension between our past, our present, and our future is what I want to build on. That, too, is a part of my life, my upbringing, my story."

This week the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater began its 2013–14 winter season at Manhattan's City Center theater. In February, it begins its annual national and world tours. For information about Alvin Ailey performances, tours, summer camps, and schools, contact: alvinailey.org



(Paul Kohnig)