

Robert Battle | Interview

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By Matthew de la Peña

Robert Battle talks about filling “big shoes.” Only the third artistic director in the history of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the new head is forging his own legacy. He surprised many in the dance world by acquiring works from choreographers like Ohad Naharin and Paul Taylor, now part of the Ailey rep. More than a year into the job, Battle continues to look toward the future with an eye on the past. That includes *The Golden Girls*.



It’s been a little more than a year since you took the reins at Ailey. How’s it different now?

It’s different that you get more adapted to a new life. You get asked different questions. And then it’s not different because it’s such a huge job, such a huge organization. I think it’ll take another couple years before it becomes normal. There’s so much to digest on any given day. I don’t have time to think about it. Once we finish our New York season in December, we have two weeks’ vacation and then we’re prepping for our domestic tour. Then we start preparing for our international tour and for City Center again. Reflection is not something you have a lot of time for.

Do you still get up every morning and check comments on Facebook?

Not religiously, but I do. It’s a fun way to be connected with our audience. Our audience is so important to us. Now that they have the opportunity to say, “Oh, I just saw a performance,” it reminds you what’s important about what we do. That’s what I like seeing from the fans of the company. Keeps you humble.

Any comments that jump out?

Sometimes people have colorful descriptions of pieces or of dancers. The language can be amusing, but it’s usually positive.

You were supposedly “groomed” to take over the company by Judith Jamison. What was the conversation like when she initially broached the subject of your potentially taking over?

We had lunch in 2008 and she basically asked if I was interested in the position. I said, “Absolutely, I’d love the opportunity to lead the company.” That was the initial conversation. It took a year before the interview process started with members of the board. To say “groomed,” I wouldn’t say that as much as it is a process. [Judith] knew what she wanted, but it took time for it to come to fruition. Her advice has always been, “You have everything you need. Be yourself. I chose you because I know that you have the equipment to do this job, so trust your instincts.”

I heard that you two have a joke about the “filling of the shoes.”

Yeah.

Care to share?

She was asked the same kinds of questions when she took over the company that I’m asked. People usually mean [“you have big shoes to fill”] in the most sincere sense of the phrase. It’s true because Judith Jamison is an icon and led this company through an amazing time, and as a dancer she was a goddess. But after you’ve heard it, like, the millionth time, when someone says, “Wow, you have big shoes to fill,” it gets a little bit like, ay yai yai. So I finally said, “Big shoes to fill, but it just so happens that I have big feet.” [Laughs] That kind of shut that down for a while. So we still laugh about that. Before I took over, I was looking at interviews of Judith Jamison when she was still in the beginning stages of taking over the company, doing all of the press. She said she didn’t feel like she was standing in shoes, but that she was standing on shoulders. That’s kind of the way I feel.

You've mentioned that you enjoy watching the Food Network and that you have a fondness for cooking. Is that a solace away from the studio?

Yeah. I love to eat. Eating is a necessity, but a pleasure as well. I remember the Food Network when it was first starting out: Emeril Lagasse and all those people who helped make it when it was on a shoestring budget. It actually encouraged me to start cooking. I've always enjoyed the educational aspect of it, like demystifying how to make a gumbo. I think because I tour and travel so much, I'm also a person who appreciates different kinds of foods, cuisines, countries and cultures. So Food Network, I find that you can demystify how to make those things yourself. It's like choreography, when you're watching someone take these ingredients and make them into a dish, the way you take movement ingredients and make them into a dance. It's a way to decompress. That and *The Golden Girls* tends to do it.

***The Golden Girls*?**

[Laughs] Well, I'm from Miami, originally, so I can appreciate the wicker chairs and everything.

What is it about those *Golden Girls*?

It's a brilliant show. The combination of the ladies, it just has all the ingredients of a great comedy. And the timing. All great humor and drama, it has to do with great timing. I'm always appreciative of that, and as a dancer and a choreographer, timing is everything. I appreciate when I see a good comedian who has great comedic timing. Everybody could say the same joke, but the timing and the rhythm is what makes it funny. It also takes me out of my artistic head for a minute, if just for a half hour. I just laugh at these situations that are so silly and fun, not trying to solve the issues of the world, or make a step that nobody else has made, or plan a season. Sometimes you just want to laugh and that's important.

Since you took over Ailey, you've acquired some not necessarily Ailey-like works. How important is that for you as a new artistic director?

For me, it was completely selfish. I'm looking at these amazing and gorgeous dancers, and then I'm just thinking, "What would I love to see them do? I'm almost thinking from an audience perspective, because most of the dancers, I did not choose. There was this distance that I had to say, "Oh, what would I like to see them do?" So I chose from my own selfish desire to see that, but also, in a broader scope, what would be my own stamp. So works like *Minus 16* or Rennie Harris's *Home*, to see the company do Paul Taylor's *Arden Court*, all of these things I thought would be an interesting addition to the repertory.

How long do you think till people stop asking that question?

Hopefully never. Hopefully I will continue to do the unexpected. Maybe the unexpected will become the norm. I love to embrace the unexpected, but in a way that really stays in line with the company's mission and this notion of being able to connect. Mr. Ailey wanted the company to be accessible. He wanted people to feel the company and have an experience. It was about the common humanity. I try to make choices that, yes, while they may be different from what people expect, they still have the alliance with the company's mission and image, but maybe in a different way.

You grew up in Miami's Liberty City neighborhood and you've talked about your amorphous family life: You refer to your great-uncle as your father and your cousin as your mother. How has your upbringing factored into your role as head of a company?

I grew up in a household that had its roots in church and community and culture and poetry and song and in the arts. Those aspects certainly shaped what I do. My great-uncle, who took me in, he and my great-aunt, I was always aware of the generosity of other people. Wanting to give back is very much a part of who I am because of that.

You first saw *Revelations* as a kid. Having seen it many times since then, how has it changed for you?

What's changed, of course, is that now I'm responsible for making sure it is safe and sound and continues to be seen and celebrated. A lot of times I'll watch parts or watch *Revelations* from the wing because I like to be on the same floor as the dancers, especially in that last section of *Revelations*. I become that little boy seeing it for the first time, who's just in awe by what I'm seeing, that this masterpiece is still alive and well and still inspiring audiences all over the world. Now I get a chance to be a part of it. I see it all in that moment, but I never want to lose the innocence of that first experience. I keep that sacred.

I'm guessing that ranks a bit higher than the first time you saw *The Golden Girls*.

Totally different ballgame. [Laughs]

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs Friday 8 through Sunday 17 at the Auditorium Theatre.