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DANCE

# Just the right stretch by Ailey

By MANUEL MENDOZA  
Special Contributor

Robert Battle could have coasted on the popularity and historical significance of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Instead, in less than two years as artistic director, the 40-year-old former dancer has put his considerable stamp on the company.

The evidence is right there in the program for its three shows at Winspear Opera House this weekend to close presenter TTAS' season. Battle has added half of the six works on the bill to the group's repertoire since he took over. Another piece he choreographed himself.

At the same time, each performance will be capped by *Revelations*, founder Ailey's signature work from 1960, probably the most-seen modern dance piece in history.

"It's a balancing act, because you don't want to do new for new's sake," Battle says about his role as only the third artistic director in the company's 55-year run as a cornerstone of the



ROBERT BATTLE

black dance tradition. "There is still a lot of work in the repertoire to keep that tradition alive. But the other part is about being innovative and daring."

At the evening shows Friday and Saturday, the Ailey dancers will perform Ohad Naharin's *Minus 16*, which consists of excerpts from several of the innovative Israeli choreographer's earlier pieces, set to an eclectic score that ranges from techno to mambo to Dean Martin.

The 1999 work is not the first Naharin dance to enter the Ailey repertoire. In fact, his late wife Mari Kajiwara was a member of the company, so he has a deep connection.

"Ohad is a brilliant choreographer," Battle says. "Beyond that, and what I love about his work, is the honesty of it, the guts. *Minus 16* represents that

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Christopher Duggan

*Revelations*, on the black church, is signature Alvin Ailey.

## Ailey pushes edge

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for me. There's something so wonderfully inventive without being forced."

Before Battle, Ailey contemporary Paul Taylor had never had a piece performed by the company. That changed shortly after Battle took the reins from Judith Jamison, who hand-picked him for the job after serving as artistic director since Ailey's death in 1989.

Battle had been a Taylor fan since discovering the Martha Graham disciple while studying dance at the Juilliard School. Taylor's *Arden Court* (1981), set to music by baroque composer William Boyce, will be performed during the Saturday matinee.

Battle isn't just reaching back into the modern dance canon to stretch his 32-member troupe. In 2011, he commissioned a new work from hip-hop choreographer Rennie Harris based on stories from people living with AIDS.

*Home*, set to gospel-flavored house music, is on the Saturday afternoon bill that also includes *In/Side*, Battle's 2008 solo for a male dancer, which will be performed by Samuel Lee Roberts. It was inspired by Nina Simone's interpretation of the song "Wild Is the Wind." "In her voice, you hear

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8 p.m. Friday and 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturday at Winspear Opera House, 2403 Flora St., Dallas. \$12 to \$125. 214-880-0202. [attpac.org](http://attpac.org). [ttas.org](http://ttas.org).

everything that's right with the world and everything that's wrong with the world," Battle says. "The dance is very guttural, and some people can appreciate it and some people probably think it's a little over the top. For me, it's dead on."

No doubt the Winspear audience will be overcome when the first words of *Revelations* — "I've been 'buked" — are heard just before the curtain rises. In it, Ailey filtered the struggles and triumphs of African-Americans through their experiences in the black church. It's estimated that 21 million people have seen it.

"You can feel the electricity in the theater," Battle says. "It's almost like a prayer or a meditation. It's not so much about seeing dance executed, but it goes beyond that to something to do with spiritual reciprocity. It affirms our existence in the world. All people have things that they need to have to overcome. It has become a ritual for people."

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