

Ailey at Lincoln Center, first time in 13 years

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By Jocelyn Noveck

NEW YORK — When Robert Battle first arrived at New York's Lincoln Center years ago, he was a dance student with a scholarship to Juilliard. On his first day, he walked up to the building he thought was the school. It turned out to be the Metropolitan Opera House.

This past week, Battle arrived at Lincoln Center in a far different capacity — as artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, one of the most-loved dance companies in the world. He was bringing the company to its first engagement at Lincoln Center — one of the premier dance addresses in the world — in 13 years.

"This time I'm pretty sure I'm in the right place," Battle, always ready with a smile and a quip, told the opening-night audience Wednesday at the David H. Koch Theater. "I saw my name on the poster outside."

Battle, appointed two years ago, has the tricky job of projecting the gravitas needed to follow his famous predecessor, Judith Jamison, who held the job for more than two decades and carved a place in dance history, and at the same time injecting fresh life into the company, via new works and ideas.

One of those new works had its world premiere Wednesday evening, a dance with strong African influences called "Four Corners" by choreographer Ronald K. Brown, set largely to music by Carl Hancock Rux. (The title refers to four angels standing on four corners of the Earth.) Battle says Brown's longstanding ties with the company made him a natural choice to launch a new work for the Lincoln Center gig; coming off a long national tour, the dancers had just three weeks to learn it.

"Because of Ron's relationship with the company and the amount of time we had, it made sense not to be starting the conversation fresh (with someone else)," Battle said in an interview this week. "His work is so deep and soulful and grounded. It sits well with the dancers' style, and there's also something about his spirit — soothing, energizing, intelligent and warm. But there's also a smoldering tension in his work."

Standouts in the cast were two Ailey veterans: the deeply expressive Matthew Rushing, who began the piece alone, his arms undulating with striking force, and Linda Celeste Sims, in an African head wrap. Both dancers were clad in deep, vibrant purple. Nine dancers joined them, and the ensemble broke into oft-changing groupings.

Following the premiere on the program was "Petite Mort" by choreographer Jiri Kylian, a much-performed work for six couples to gorgeous Mozart piano concertos, performed by the Ailey company for the first time here.

And since no Ailey gala evening would quite satisfy the audience without the company's signature work, "Revelations," that was indeed the dessert at the end of the meal. (It actually seems an understatement to call "Revelations" merely a signature work — after all, it's often described as the most-seen piece of modern dance across the globe). As always at an Ailey show, this half-century-old masterpiece set to African-American spirituals and gospel songs drew the loudest cheers, with the audience on its feet after the rollicking "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham" — with Rushing again front and center.

Having performed the work so many times, do the dancers tire of it? No, said Battle, describing the piece, choreographed in 1960 by a young Alvin Ailey, as a revered rite of passage for each company.

"There's sort of a ritual happening, a sort of passing on of the material from the veteran dancers to the younger ones," he said. "That's in the African tradition as well. And there's something about performing it that takes over and trumps the feeling of being tired and all that. The piece works on you."

Battle said the Lincoln Center engagement, which ends Sunday, came about because of openings in the schedule due to the departure of the New York City Opera at the end of 2011. (Ailey performs an annual monthlong winter season at New York City Center, and will keep doing so.)

"This idea came up early in my process of taking over," Battle said. "We found the time in our touring schedule and decided to do it. Hopefully, this will be an annual event."