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Expect to see artistic director Robert Battle's imprint when the Ailey dance troupe plays his hometown this week

BATTLE PLAN

BY JORDAN LEVIN
jlevin@miamiherald.com

For most of its 50-plus years, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has had a distinctive profile — theatrical, energetic, heart-felt, with powerhouse dancers — that has helped make it the most successful and widely seen modern dance company in the world.

That character was shaped by a strong allegiance to the aesthetic and ideals of its storied founder, Alvin Ailey, who died in 1989, that was maintained by his successor, Judith Jamison.

But that allegiance, and the popularity it has engendered, has sometimes brought criticism that the troupe is in an artistic rut. Its current

artistic director, Liberty City native Robert Battle, has made some expanding the Ailey repertory and image a priority since he took over from Jamison in 2011. His vision for the company will be more apparent than ever when the troupe performs beginning Thursday at the Adrienne Arsht Center in programs that feature all four of the new dances the company premiered in New York in December.

They include contemporary ballet choreographer Wayne McGregor's *Chrono*.
• TURN TO DANCE, 4M



BOLD CHOICES: Linda Celeste Sims and Jamar Roberts in Azure Barton's 'LIFT.'

Ailey troupe brings new works, vision to Miami



JOYFUL DEFIANCE: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Bill T. Jones' "D-Man in the Waters."

PHOTOS BY PAUL HOLMES

originally made for England's Royal Ballet, and the biblically inspired *Four Corners* by Ronald K. Brown, whose mix of modern and African movement with spirituality has made his *Grace* an Ailey company and audience favorite. Bill T. Jones' *D-Man in the Waters* (Part I), made for his own company in 1999, is a joyful, defiant response to AIDS. And Aszure Barton's *LIFT*, created on the Ailey dancers, continues a company tradition of fostering new dance makers.

Battle credits Ailey with creating a repertory company open to a wide range of styles.

"It gives you the opportunity to be expansive in all disciplines," the New World School of the Arts graduate says. But he is eager to push the envelope further.

"The sky's the limit, and there are some things I'm interested in that I'm building up to. ... Through having work that is a little bit different, you start to make space to become even more adventurous."

Chroma is probably the most daring new entry. McGregor, a hot contemporary ballet choreographer, made it in 2006 for the Royal Ballet, where he is a resident choreographer. The score features orchestrations of music by Jack White III of alternative rock band The White Stripes and a soaring white set by minimalist architect John Pawson. (The massive structure posed its own challenges for the Ailey company's frequent tours, and the Miami shows will be the first time it will use the set on tour.)



If you go

What: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

When: 8 p.m. Thursday, "Chroma", "Four Corners" and "Revelations"; 8 p.m. Friday, "LIFT", "D-Man in the Waters" and "Revelations"; 2 p.m. Saturday, Ailey/Ellington "Night Creature", "Pas de Duke", "The River" and "Revelations" followed by Q&A with Ailey dancers; 8 p.m. Saturday, "Chroma", "Four Corners" and "Revelations"; 2 p.m. Sunday, "LIFT", *D-Man in the Waters* and "Revelations"

Where: Ziff Ballet Opera House, Adrienne Arsht Center, 1300 Biscayne Blvd., Miami
Info: Tickets \$25 to \$120 at arshtcenter.org or 505-949-6722

tions. When he made *Grace*, his first piece for the company, in 1999, it was partly to say thank you.

"I was just so grateful to Mr. Ailey for creating this fire in me to create work," says Brown. "It's a real personal thank you to him for telling this little boy he could make a dance."

Brown's polyrhythmic, fluid mix of African, club and modern dance is far different from the muscular Horton and Graham techniques that are the basis for the company's style. But the sense of purpose and spirituality that Brown demands from the dancers fit well with the company's ethos.

"There's a clarity to have spirit in everything you do, and not put-

ting who had paved the way for black modern dancers and choreographers." Bill T. said Alvin protected him," Battle says.

An open-handed gesture in *D-Man* is taken from the "Wade in the Water" section of *Revelations*. And Jones made *D-Man* as AIDS was decimating the dance community. Jones himself became HIV positive, and Zane, his longtime personal and choreographic partner, died of the disease in 1988. *D-Man* was dedicated to dancer Damian Acquavella, a member of Jones and Zane's troupe who died of AIDS after its 1989 premiere — the year the disease also took Ailey.

Though the Ailey company has been centered on works by its founder, it has always commissioned dances by other artists, both cutting-edge and mainstream. Aszure Barton is the latest. Battle got to know the 38-year-old Canadian choreographer while attending Juilliard Conservatory with Barton's older sister, and has admired her dances for some time. "What I love about her work is the physicality, the intensity, the boldness of her choices," he says.

Barton, who has made dances for Baryshnikov, American Ballet Theater and Nederlands Dans-Theater, she she admires the willingness of the Ailey dancers to try things that were new to them. She worked for five weeks — an unusually long rehearsal period — to shape the work with the dancers, while Curtis Macdonald composed the score in the studio alongside them.

"I was surprised at their willing-

Battle says he encountered some skepticism about tackling a ballet piece, just as when the company premiered *Petite Morte* by Jiri Kylian, an acclaimed European ballet choreographer, last year. He thinks that reaction stems not only from doubts about whether modern dancers have the technical chops to dance a ballet piece, but from longtime — and often unconscious — skepticism about African Americans doing classical work — especially a troupe renowned for the down-home gospel fervor of *Revelations*.

"There's a certain idea about what an Ailey dancer can and should dance," Battle says. "African-American people and artists have been dealing with that for a very long time."

McGregor was not one of those skeptics. "He'd seen the company a lot growing up," says Battle. "It's something he always wanted to do."

Ailey dancer Alicia Graf Mack says McGregor focused on the dancers' abilities, not whether they could do perfect pirouettes.

"He was very excited to see the way we moved and to see his work on a company like Ailey," she says. "We all felt very comfortable."

Even as Battle pushes the company in new directions, he is also committed to keeping it connected to its roots. A Saturday matinee program is made up of Alvin Ailey works set to the music of Duke Ellington, and the troupe dances *Revelations* at every show on tour. But there are also surprising links between Alvin Ailey and two of the new pieces this season.

Brown, 47, choreographed his first piece in second grade after seeing the Ailey troupe in *Revela-*

DARING NEW ENTRY: Rachael McLaren and Kirven Douthit-Boyd in Wayne McGregor's 'Chroma.'



BIBLICALLY INSPIRED: The dancers perform in Ronald K. Brown's 'Four Corners,' above. Below, a leap in the performance of 'D-Man in the Waters.'



"That approach is something a lot of [the dancers] have."

Four Corners is based on a biblical passage that tells of four angels in the four corners of the world, and Brown sees it as a sort of metaphorical pilgrimage. "It's kind of a wish I have that if we all prayed ... we could make peace happen," he says. "You have to have that intention in how we move."

Jones, whose work with partner Arnie Zane in the 1970s was known for its conceptual rigor and experimentation, got a boost into the mainstream in 1983 when he made *Fever Swamp* for the Ailey troupe. There were many differences between the radical young choreographer and the company's revered founder. (When Jones asked Ailey what he thought of a piece he'd made on the troupe's students in which one dancer did nothing but play with her eyelashes, Ailey replied: "I liked it when they danced.")

But Jones also admired the man

Barton says. "The work is really detailed, there are a lot of layers ... and they were really diligent and helpful with each other. At the end of the rehearsals I felt this elation — like I had extra air in my body."

Being so much a part of the creative process was new for the dancers, says Mack. "We always want to do it right, but she wasn't looking for us to do it right," Mack says. "She was looking for us to say the things she wanted us to say with the movement."

From Barton's open-minded process to finding that she could hoist a man on high in *D-Man*, Mack says this season has pushed her and the rest of the company beyond their already considerable limits.

"What's really wonderful about being here is I stretch myself farther than I thought I could, and every year I'm challenged to redefine myself as a dancer and redefine what I think I can do," Mack says. "And I'm always surprised."