



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Kicks Off New Tour

February 6, 2014
By Michel Martin

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is one of the most renowned performing arts companies in the world. They've kicked off their 2014 North American tour and they're blending old favorites with new performances. Host Michel Martin speaks with the company's artistic director Robert Battle.

If you are a fan of the performing arts, especially dance, then you most certainly know the name Alvin Ailey. He founded the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1958 at a time when few African-Americans had access to, let alone were welcomed into, the worlds of modern or classical dance. Remarkably, nearly 25 years after Ailey's death, at a time when many art institutions struggled just to survive, what Alvin Ailey built endures. The company remains one of the most recognized and celebrated dance companies both in the U.S. and around the world, famous above all for Ailey's signature piece, "Revelations."

LISTEN HERE: <http://www.npr.org/2014/02/06/272455503/alvin-ailey-american-dance-theater-kicks-off-new-tour>

MARTIN: In all that time, the company has been led by only three people - Ailey, himself, the renowned dancer Judith Jamison and now Robert Battle. The company just kicked off its 2014 North American tour, and that's how we were able to catch up with artistic director Robert Battle here in Washington, D.C. He's with us now. Welcome, thank you so much for joining us.

ROBERT BATTLE: It's great to be here.

MARTIN: We just heard "Wade in the Water" from, as we said, his - probably his most famous piece, "Revelations." And a lot of people have a moment when they - a Ailey moment, and you have, as I understand it, you have a memory of the first time you saw "Revelations." Do you mind sharing it?

BATTLE: Growing up in Miami, Florida, and more specifically in Liberty City, tough neighborhood, but luckily Mr. Ailey said that dance is for everybody. And keeping with that, I was able to see a student performance when the company was on tour there. I'm 41, I was 12 years old then. It embodied everything I already knew.

Having grown up going to church, my mother was a church pianist. Also, she had a group called the Afro-Americans. They wore Dashikis. She had an Afro. They did poetry and song relating to the black experience. So I was, you know, knowing something about Mari Evans, Phillis Wheatley. And I grew up with that around me, and so when I saw "Revelations," it seemed to embody everything that I had learned but in a physical way that I never thought possible. So I connected as a young person. And once you connect to something - I never let it go. And so here I am today.

MARTIN: And you went on to your own distinguished career...

BATTLE: Yeah.

MARTIN: Founding your own company, choreographing pieces - also pieces for the Ailey company and for your own company...

BATTLE: Yes.

MARTIN: Which, sadly, you had to close...

BATTLE: Yes.

MARTIN: In order to take on this job. And we spoke with you in 2011. And at that time you'd only been artistic director for just a couple of months. And you told us that, you know, performing "Revelations" was almost a requirement for the company. I mean, if it was in the constitution, right, there might be like an amendment there that says we have to see it. Let's hear just a short clip from that conversation we had then.

BATTLE: We're not going to take "Revelations" off the stage because I believe that it has become tradition. I believe that it's just as important as knowing who Martin Luther King was. But as people talk, we keep dancing "Revelations" and people keep coming to see it.

MARTIN: This piece continues to captivate in the way that it does. I mean, I - having seen the company perform a number of times, this piece always gets an incredible emotional response. Why do you think that is? And are you surprised by that?

BATTLE: Not so much surprised, happy about it, certainly, for many reasons, but it's a masterpiece. And I think it's a timeless work of art. And so whatever masterpiece embodies the sense that it crosses all generations and cultural lines. I took over in 2011 while we were on tour in Russia, and seeing people, you know, dancing in the aisles and clapping to and fro as if they were in a Baptist Church somewhere, you know, to me that struck me about the power of this work. It's transcendent. Certainly, it is about the experiences of African-Americans, but it is about our common humanity.

MARTIN: But now, though, that you've been in the chair for a while now, is there a way that you wish to steer the company in a direction that, perhaps, had not been seen before?

BATTLE: I'm turning the volume up, I like to say, on what is already there, the notion that anything is possible. You know, I love the quote that says, I am a human being and nothing human can be alien to me. So that's sort of the way I lead. And so even bringing to the repertory, "Chroma," choreographed by Wayne McGregor - he choreographed that in 2006 for The Royal Ballet. And I don't think anybody was thinking about the Ailey company doing this work, as a modern dance company and all the ideas people have about what is capable. But I saw the work and I knew that my dancers could tear it up. And so they did, they are. And audiences are loving it. But that's the kind of expansive way I want to lead the company.

MARTIN: Well, what do you see as your mission at this stage of the company's history? I mean, one of the reasons that Ailey founded the company was to showcase black talent and artists at a time when African-American artists did not have many opportunities to perform on these kinds of stages, in these kinds of venues. And I know a lot of people, frankly, thought they couldn't do it. I mean, people would make comments about, you know, the black figure, you know, oh, black people can't do this - their, you know, thighs are too big, their butts are too big. They can't - you know, that sort of thing. Now that that's not the challenge, what is your mission?

BATTLE: The challenge is to - I think, what Mr. Ailey wanted - I mean, more than thinking of him on a pedestal that sometimes tends to not look at him as an artist. He was an artist who wanted to express himself through dance. And so by charting that course, made it possible for people like myself now to think expansively and to lead the company based on what my vision is, not what someone thinks it ought to be.

MARTIN: What gives you that freedom? Is it the financial success or financial stability, or is it the fact that there's a core of love that you figure you can afford to maybe test a little bit?

BATTLE: Right, right. Well, it's a well-oiled machine, as Judith Jamison would say. I mean, from an amazing board of directors and donors and the staff and the crew - it's a big family. We haven't lost touch with that part of it, that it's a big family moving forward. We're not just corporate. And so there's that sense that we're all gathered together around this dance, around this thing that inspired us to be involved with the organization in the first place. So Judith Jamison did a wonderful thing of reminding us of where this all started and why we're here in the first place, and that's what I try to continue to do.

MARTIN: If you're just joining us, I'm speaking with Robert Battle. He is the artistic director for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, only the third to lead the company in its existence. He's joining us in our Washington, D.C. studios while the company is in town performing at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. You just set records at your New York run.

BATTLE: Yeah.

MARTIN: You have an amazing complex in New York - by some standards it's the largest building dedicated to arts education in the country. Thousands of people take classes at your facility every year, and not just professionals, but just regular people. What's the secret sauce?

BATTLE: At the forefront, of course, is the dancers. I have 30 of the most wonderful, engaging, charismatic, beautiful dancers in the world who dance with their hearts. That's what people see. That's usually what brings them in the door in the first place. Those dancers inspire everything that we try to do. I think that's important in any organization - that you

remember where this all comes from. And it was Mr. Ailey wanting to express something beautiful about people - what is strange, what is beautiful - and that really is sort of the core of what we try to do.

MARTIN: What makes a piece suitable in your view?

BATTLE: Many things, but at the end of looking at the work and seeing, first of all, if I like it 'cause I'm going to have to see it a lot because we tour more than any dance company in the world. So that's one part of it. The other part is I think about how will the dancers feel doing it? Will it inspire them because, in turn, if they're inspired by what they're doing, that translates into inspiration to the audience. But certainly works that engage - that has to be a part of it. Finding that really, and also moving forward, is the challenge.

MARTIN: One of the points I want to make for people who have never had the opportunity to see the company is that it is multiracial and it always has been, has it not? I mean, Mr. Ailey founded it with the intention of showcasing African-Americans dancers because, as we mentioned, did not have these opportunities elsewhere. But it's always been multiracial.

BATTLE: Yes.

MARTIN: So what do you think it is that people see when they - and I'm wondering, since you do tour more than any other company, if people come expecting different things?

BATTLE: I think they do. You know, I think some people go like, I've got to get my "Revelations" in, I'll look at whatever else you bring, but you've got to bring me "Revelations." And we're fine with that, you know. And then I can show you whatever I want. Maybe it's something that will become your new favorite. But I think they expect that excellence that the dancers are, quote and unquote, on point, you know, that they know they're going to leave there feeling uplifted. You're going to leave feeling better than you did when you walked in. And that's what they expect and that's what we give them.

MARTIN: Why is that important to you?

BATTLE: I think it's important...

MARTIN: Because some artists feel that their job is to shake you up and to kind of mess with your head so that you're haunted by it, you know.

BATTLE: Yeah.

MARTIN: And I don't mean that in a bad way, I mean, just some people feel that their job is to keep you haunted, right.

BATTLE: Right.

MARTIN: But you feel uplift is important, why is that important?

BATTLE: Because uplifted doesn't necessarily - you know, it's like when I think of the blues - you may be crying, you know, while you're listening, but at the end there is a catharsis that happens that you feel a sense of release. So even if it's a challenging work, I think at the end there has to be this sense of some kind of journey.

MARTIN: Is there anything you feel yet burdened by?

BATTLE: Burdened? I don't know if I would even think of it as burden. I feel - you know, my last name is Battle so - I mean - and before I danced I studied martial arts. So there's a fight in me somewhere. But I enjoy the challenge. And what I would say about that is part of me enjoys that since that sometimes there are questions about what one should or should not be doing in terms of maybe a dance or a type of dance or a type of work - whatever that is. So it challenges me, that kind of ignorance when it comes to what we're able to do.

MARTIN: Well, what about the other way. Well, because Jada Pinkett Smith, you know her, the actress, also a philanthropist and she's also been a funder of documentaries and artistic endeavors. And she posed a challenge to black women earlier - last year - that caused a bit of a stir. And she was saying that she thought it was kind of time for some of the black women's magazines to perhaps showcase a white women on the cover, 'cause, like, why not, you know? We're challenging the white magazines to put black women on the cover - or women of color on the cover - so what about the other way, is it time for a sort of turn around? Well, this was not well received. This was not well received. And I just wonder, I mean, do you feel - I mean, as I mentioned, the company's multiracial, but do you - would you put a white dancer in a signature role in "Revelations," for example.

BATTLE: I'm sure we have, absolutely. But it's not - that's not how I look at it, you know. I look at the dancer in front of me. And a part of the secret sauce, by the way, I have to mention, is Masazumi Chaya, who is our associate artistic director, who was Mr. Ailey's right hand, Judith Jamison's left and both of my hands in some cases. And so we really look at what's in front of us and we lead from that.

MARTIN: In what sense? Do you like at the dancer's body, do you look at his or her artistic sensibility, and you say what can I build around this person?

BATTLE: Absolutely. Sometimes you're looking at someone and say this is an unlikely role for you, but maybe this will bring out something in your personality that you don't know is even there. And so sometimes it's a challenge. So there are many things that go into it.

MARTIN: There are probably dancers in the company or studying with the company who can't remember a time when there was not an Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to look up to. And I wonder how the prominence of the company and the longevity of the company has changed the way dancers think about their careers, particularly dancers of color.

BATTLE: Absolutely. I mean - and when you think about so many dancers who were students at the Ailey school who didn't necessarily dance with the company, who are now teachers or dancers in the company who have their own companies, people who were influenced by "Revelations," who created their own "Revelations" and still are. I mean, the impact of what Mr. Ailey set up can be felt far and wide. And part of that is our touring, you know.

When I think about now us being in Miami, February, I believe it's the 20th through the 23th, where I grew up, and I think about the student performance that we will do there and maybe somebody like me will be sitting in the audience at 12 years old and then want my job at some point - that is inspiring to me. And that's the way we reach people, bit by bit. But it's that inspiration that never dies and it continues to multiply and multiply. And so that's what we're trying to do.

MARTIN: What's next for you?

BATTLE: My goodness. I can only look right in front of me. I'm thinking about Atlanta that's coming up 13th through the 16th. I'm thinking about, you know, all of these fabulous stops where I get to see people who love the company. For me, it is always what dancers do. It's part of our training. We always are in front of a mirror looking at everything and seeing what we like and what we don't like and how we fix that, it's that accountability and always wanting to do better. So for me it's constantly thinking about, well, if we broke a record here, what can we do next year? So I'm like two seasons ahead already. But it is very exciting and a wonderful time for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

MARTIN: Well, thank you for stopping long enough in this season to speak to us.

BATTLE: Absolutely.

MARTIN: Robert Battle is the artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. He was kind enough to join us in our Washington, D.C. studios. As we mentioned, the company is in town performing at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and he stopped by. Thank you so much.

BATTLE: Thank you.

MARTIN: And that's our program for today. I'm Michel Martin and this is TELL ME MORE from NPR News. Let's talk more tomorrow.