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## FREQUENT FLIER

### Seeing the World Through Its Barbecue Joints

By ROBERT BATTLE

**W**HEN I graduated from Juilliard in 1994, I joined a dance touring company and started flying a lot. Since I never flew a lot before, it was really exciting to me. Now, as artistic director for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, I'm flying so much it's tough to keep track of all the places we go.

I do have some rituals, and one of them is finding a barbecue establishment wherever we are touring. I could give recommendations for a lot of different places, even in Paris, where apparently I ate most of the ribs a particular bistro had to offer. The only way I knew that was that the owner told the crew and dancers he was out of ribs because their boss, meaning me, ate them all.

The fact that I fly so much is a little amusing to me since I'm not the world's best flier.

When I began flying, I really did enjoy it, but then I had a few experiences that made me a little nervous. I was in Brazil flying in a small plane, and I swear water

was leaking in through the window. I know that wasn't the case, but I was nervous, so my brain went into overdrive. There was some slight turbulence, but to me it felt like a roller coaster.

An attendant was taking drink orders, and when she was right by me, it felt as if the hand of God whacked the plane, though it was probably only an air pocket. The attendant lost her balance, and I was covered in orange juice and a little bit of tonic. It was a nice mix. We leveled out, and everything was fine for the rest of the flight, but I did feel like kissing the ground when we landed.

Then I was on another flight for work, and the plane was rocking a little bit because of turbulence. Admittedly, I was a little nervous, but a woman across the aisle was grabbing on to the seat in front of her and throwing her head back as if she saw a monster. The attendant came over to calm her, and all I could think was that if I didn't get control of my nervousness about flying, that was going to be me someday.

So I really try to tough it out. I generally don't talk to people on flights because I feel as if I'm on duty and need to prepare for

**Q. How often do you fly for business?**

**A.** A lot. We travel to two or three cities a week, about six to eight months out of the year. It's crazy.

**Q. What's your least favorite airport?**

**A.** J.F.K. It feels as if it's due for a renovation, not in terms of looks but in the ease of navigating it. It's a little prehistoric.

**Q. Of all the places you've been, what's the best?**

**A.** Paris is just spectacular, and I still remember my first time there. I just love everything about the city.

**Q. What's your secret airport vice?**

**A.** Celebrity magazines. Generally, I'm not into those things, but I can't stop reading them at the airport, which is kind of embarrassing — but not as embarrassing as my need for fast food at airports. I'm a Whopper guy, and I can track down a Burger King at every airport I go to. If I can't, it's all about the fast-food cheeseburger.

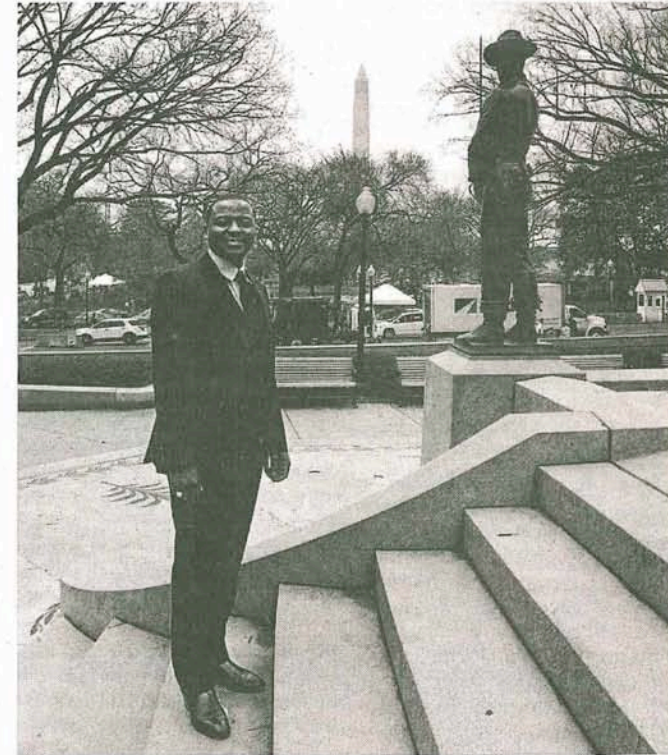
meetings or events. But on one flight several years ago, I was seated next to a woman who was very calm, and I remember thinking that I wished I could be like her.

We started talking, and she asked me if I was afraid to fly. I don't know what gave that away. Maybe it was my ramrod posture as I was staring straight ahead, thinking that I could will the plane to stay in the air. I told her

that yes, indeed, I was a little fearful of flying. She told me she was a healer.

I probably gave her a strange look, since I don't know much about people who call themselves healers. She asked if she could hold my hand for a minute. I said fine. I'm open-minded.

I swear I felt this heat radiating off her, and she told me that everything was going to be O.K. I guess I believed her because I



BENNETT RINK

Robert Battle, artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, taking in the sights in Washington.

immediately calmed down and have been pretty good about flying ever since then.

But I must admit I also discov-

ered the calming effects of a nice Bloody Mary. Give me a Bloody Mary during a flight and I really am good to go.

As told to Joan Raymond. Email: joan.raymond@nytimes.com