

Dance dance revolution

The Alvin Ailey company gets ready for one of its most exciting seasons yet.



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Richard Chen See is setting up for a rehearsal at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater studio. Today, the company will be running through choreographer Paul Taylor's fiery "Piazzolla Caldera" for the first time.

Chen See danced in the very first performance of the piece for the Taylor Company in 1997, and he's now staging it — and running the practices — for Alvin Ailey.

"It's like learning a brand new language," he says about "Caldera," a work inspired by the music of the Argentine composer Astor Piazzol-



The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. ANDREW ECCLES

la. "The tango is a working-class dance, and the dancers have to interact with this Latin desire but combine it with the clean precision of modern dance."

It's also technically demanding: A man glides across the room, two female dancers hanging from his arms; one guy suddenly flips another upside down and, while holding each other, the two begin doing a series of cartwheels. There's a lot of violent tussling and intricate footwork and an almost desperate hunger in all the performers' interactions.

"That's the great thing about tango," says Chen See. "You can be totally in love or at odds and battling, sometimes at the same time."

"Piazzolla Caldera" is just one of — count 'em — four company premieres (three of them

world debuts) that Alvin Ailey has planned this winter season.

Also on deck: Ronald K. Brown's Cuban-inflected "Open Door," featuring music by Arturo O'Farrill and the Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra; "Untitled America: First Movement," the first of a three-part series about the U.S. incarceration system created for the company by choreographer and MacArthur "Genius" Kyle Abraham; and "Awakening," the first work choreographed by Robert Battle since joining Alvin Ailey as artistic director in 2011.

"I have eclectic tastes," says Battle in his office, talking about the season's ambitious programming. "It's hard to distill into one sentence what my vision is, but I think of [company founder] Mr. Ailey's generous spirit, the commu-



Linda Celeste Sims and Yannick Lebrun. [artnewrecess](#)

nity he fostered, every day. And I know there are some things I do that ruffle feathers, but sometimes the things

worth doing are the things that people don't understand right away." He cites Stravinsky's riot-inducing "Rite of

Spring," one of the most notorious, and best, ballets ever performed. "I just follow my gut and see where that leads."

Battle's spirit of adventure and experimentation is in the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater's DNA. Started in 1958 by African-American choreographer Alvin Ailey, the multiracial troupe combined elements of ballet, jazz and traditional African dance, and from the beginning confronted such issues as slavery, racism and injustice through movement. But their performances were also celebrations of minority

cultures, such as an early work paying homage to the blues and Ailey's Southern childhood in Depression-era Texas.

This season, the company will be mounting a new production of that piece, "Blues Suite," as well as another Ailey classic, "Cry," created in 1971 for his muse, former ballerina Judith Jamison. "It was a birthday gift for Ailey's mother, and it was a real collaboration between him

and Jamison," says Battle. "It was one of the great partnerships in dance, and it's something that will live on for a long, long time." For this production, the 72-year-old Jamison will be coming into the studio to coach the dancers herself.

"It'll be one of those moments that you just wish you had been in that room to witness," says Battle. "That's definitely one of the highlights of the season."

The spirit of Ailey