

COVER STORY

If you go

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater: 8 p.m. Thursday–Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday, April 23–26. \$40–\$96. Zellerbach Hall, Bancroft Way at Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley. (510) 642-9988. www.calperformances.org.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater: Robert Moses brings a new spirit to the company

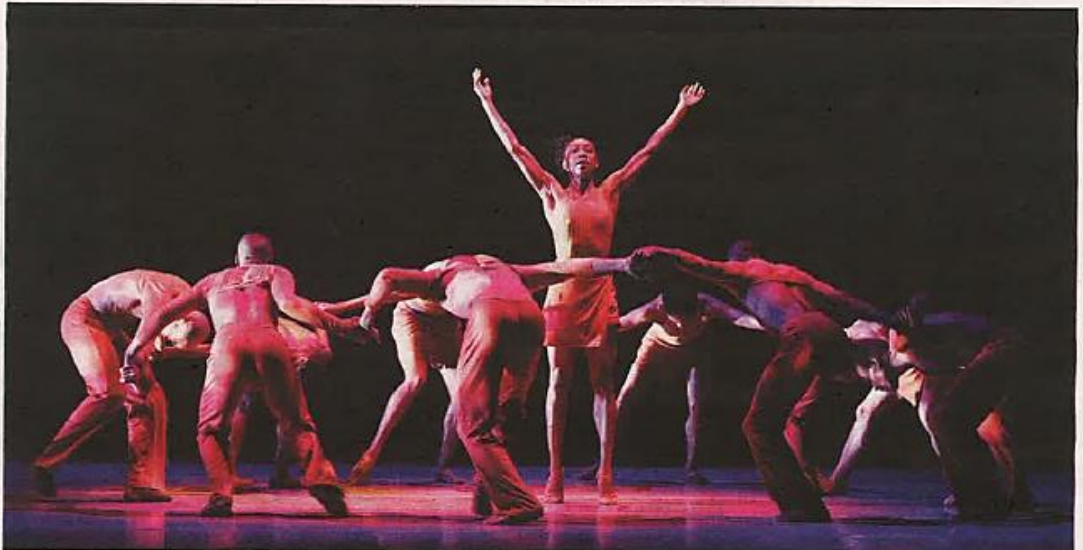
By Rachel Howard

Back in 2010, when Robert Battle was announced as the next artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (only the third director in the company's 57-year history), everyone seemed to have one pressing question: What new choreographers would he tap to work with Ailey's awe-inspiring dancers?

It was a loaded inquiry: The troupe was beloved by audiences worldwide for stirring performances of one famous masterpiece, "Revelations" — and chided by critics for commissioning new dances that didn't measure up. Small wonder Battle said he'd need more time to name his picks. But one choreographer's name came instantly to his lips: the Bay Area's own Robert Moses. And this week, the Ailey company is back in Berkeley for its annual Cal Performances residency with Moses' first creation for the company, "The Pleasure of the Lesson," part of three programs showcasing Battle's new Ailey strategy.

With its fierce attack, grooving rhythm and heartfelt urgency, "The Pleasure of the Lesson," set to music by Bay Area composer and vocalist David Worm, exemplifies why Moses was an obvious choice for Ailey, though his company, Robert Moses' Kin, had seldom been seen in New York.

"I think Robert's work is so wonderfully intelligent, instinctual and challenging in the right way," Battle said recently from Los Angeles during Ailey's 18-city tour, explaining that he first saw Moses' work at the prestigious Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, then traveled to San



Paul Kolink

Members of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in "The Pleasure of the Lesson," by Bay Area choreographer Robert Moses.

Francisco for more. "This is the type of dance you don't see any replica of. And I thought the sheer physicality of the work would be a wonderful mesh with the company."

But just as important as how Moses would mesh with the Ailey dancers was how he would "show them new ways."

"Robert's a sketch artist," Battle said. "He likes the process messy. Our Ailey training dictates that the dancers want to be given a very clear picture, a shape. Robert likes to give you an idea, and you fill in what he's trying to say. I think that's what makes his work otherworldly, the way he leaves that space for interpretation."

To Moses, his three weeks of creating "The Pleasure" in Ailey's luxurious Manhattan studios was "a blur" and "something I've wanted to do for a long time." He was struck by the care longtime Associate Artistic Director Masazumi Chaya devotes to maintaining the precise details of the hundreds of dances in Ailey's repertory. "It's a garden of art," Moses said.

Under 42-year-old Battle, that garden is blooming in unexpected ways. True, this weekend's Program A launches with "Odetta," by former Ailey dancer (and now rehearsal director) Matthew Rushing. A tribute to the celebrated singer, its storytelling style is reminiscent of

Alvin Ailey's work. But featured on Program B is Dutch choreographer Hans Van Manen's enigmatic "Polish Pieces," and included on Program C is Christopher Wheeldon's "After the Rain," part of a surprising Ailey trend of acquiring contemporary ballet works but dancing them with a powerful Ailey accent.

Perhaps most intriguing during this engagement is the inclusion of a 1932 solo by Sierra Leone-born choreographer Asadata Dafora, "Awassa Astrige/Ostrich."

"That was one of the first fusions of African dance with a modern dance sensibility in terms of staging," Battle said. "Often now what I see with repertory companies — it's great that we're looking to the future, to the up and coming

— but I thought, what about the notion that in order to look forward, you need to look to the past? That the past isn't just the past."

That's certainly true at Ailey headquarters as Battle, who never met Ailey, leans on Chaya ("He's the glue") and stays in frequent contact with his predecessor as director, Ailey's muse, Judith Jamison. Jamison once remarked that Battle reminded her of Ailey, a comment Battle shies from commenting on, except to say, "I definitely have a concern to see others thrive. And if I can offer a space for that to happen, I love to do that."

Rachel Howard is a freelance writer. E-mail: 96hours@sfgate.com