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Battle says memories infuse Ailey 'Awakening'



LAURA MOLZAHN
Dance Card

Robert Battle, artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater since 2011, is hesitant to admit that his first new work for the company, "Awakening" might be just a tiny bit autobiographical. "I don't want to seem I'm doing a self-narrative," he says. "But I think it's true."

In a way, yes. "Awakening" one of four Chicago premieres on the three programs coming to the Auditorium Theatre, March 8 through March 13, is also about Ailey — "the man, not the legend," says Battle, who now realizes how "difficult but necessary" it must have been for Ailey to start the company in 1958. "It was his calling. I feel this is my calling."

Noting that former artistic director Judith Jamison has often said she wasn't filling shoes but standing on shoulders, Battle says he thought about her words when he accepted, on Alvin Ailey's behalf, a posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2014. "Standing there with President Obama, I was thinking of the shoulders he's standing on, Martin Luther King and others who fought for civil rights. That's something that's been really in my heart."

As Battle describes "Awakening," it sounds like spiritual, not literal, biography and autobiography, opening with a chaotic section for the 12 dancers and closing with something very like church. The piece debuted in New York in December; when Battle and I talked, it had been touring nearly a month, including to his hometown of Miami.



PAUL KOLNIK

"Awakening" is a new work from Robert Battle, artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

"As I'm watching the dance, it's evolving for me," says Battle. "I'm seeing different things." In Miami, the woman he calls his mother — actually a cousin who raised him from the age of 7 or so — saw the piece for the first time and drew a connection between the chaotic opening and his childhood that hadn't occurred to him.

"She said, 'That first section, I know what that was: That was those riots (in 1980) that you experienced in Liberty City,'" says Battle, describing it as one of the poorest neighborhoods in Miami. Shortly after the riots, he says, "I was driving with my great-uncle, who I knew as my dad, and I remember seeing this Michelin tires store, which we would always pass by — one of those big buildings, flat, but for a child it was the biggest building I ever saw, with one of those Michelin men on top. I was fasci-

nated by it.

"The building was on fire," he says. "And what I remember is nobody was putting the fire out. Now, when I was a kid — it feels like 'true confession' here — I wanted to be a fireman. Every year, they'd give me a fire truck. And nobody was putting out that fire."

Acknowledging that his mother might be right, Battle says, "Things come out in the studio, in the creative process, that lie in our subconscious."

What was it like to be in the studio with the Ailey dancers for the first time, creating? "I really felt like they were my dancers," says Battle. "There's something about that intimacy, that vulnerability, trying to bring some vision to life. The dancers were so behind me, wanting it to happen, to do well. It was really a wonderful feeling. I almost feel bad for the audience that they

don't get to experience that."

Though Battle delayed making a dance for the Ailey company partly because his first priority was to establish his directorial vision, he also believes he was waiting "to feel that vulnerability in the studio." As artistic director, he adds, "One constantly has to project strength and resolve. There can be no sense of 'I'm not sure.' Everybody's watching you. I think finally I was ready to feel that vulnerability."

Battle created his other Chicago-bound dance, "No Longer Silent," in 2007 for 18 Juilliard students. Part of conductor James Conlon's project to expose music by "degenerate" composers silenced during the Holocaust, it hadn't been performed in this country since 2007 until last December.

Erwin Schulhoff's "Ogelala" — the music Battle used, composed in the early 1920s — "had nothing

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

When: 7:30 p.m. March 8-11,
2 and 8 p.m. March 12,
3 p.m. March 13

Where: Auditorium Theatre,
50 E. Congress Parkway

Tickets: \$33-\$103 at 312-341-
2300 or auditoriumtheatre.org

to do with the war," Battle says. "But I heard overtones of the war." Mentioning the Black Lives Matter and Hands Up, Don't Shoot movements, Battle says, "It's interesting how the piece relates to what's happening in the world now. There's still genocide, there's still the peril of hatred and ignorance."

Also new to Chicago are Ronald K. Brown's "Open Door," set to Afro-Latin jazz, and Rennie Harris' "Exodus," set to gospel and house music.

Also coming up

Lucky Plush Productions: Has-been superheroes take on the forces of evil in Julia Rhoads' new "Trip the Light Fantastic: The Making of SuperStrip." 7:30 p.m. Thursday at the Harris Theater, 205 E. Randolph St., \$10-\$55 at 312-334-7777 or harristheaterchicago.org

Joe Goode Performance Group: The evening-length "Hush" features six characters, derived from real-life interviews, in a rundown bar. Mature content. 7:30 p.m. March 10-12 at Dance Center of Columbia College, 1306 S. Michigan Ave., \$30 at 312-369-8330 or colum.edu/dancecenter

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