

Historic dance company prepares for new steps

February 23, 2016



Robert Battle grew up in one of Miami's poorest neighborhoods wearing metal braces on his legs but dreaming of dance. Thirty years later, he runs the renowned Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater -- the very company that inspired him as a child. Battle joins Jeffrey Brown to discuss how dance can transform lives and his vision for the company's future.

GWEN IFILL: Finally tonight: A dance company steeped in tradition takes bold new steps, and finds direction under a new leader.

Jeffrey Brown has our look.

JEFFREY BROWN: "Revelations," a dance set to gospel songs and spirituals, over five decades, it's become an American classic, and still the showpiece of the renowned Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. It's opened the eyes and minds of many, including, in the 1980s, a teenager living in one of Miami's poorest neighborhoods.

ROBERT BATTLE, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater: I saw myself. I saw possibility. Although the curtain went down, I went up.

JEFFREY BROWN: Years later, Robert Battle heads the company that helped change his own life.

How did you see your task when you took over the company?

ROBERT BATTLE: Wow. That's just to survive.

JEFFREY BROWN: First survive.

ROBERT BATTLE: First survive.

JEFFREY BROWN: Battle is just the third leader of a company that was founded by Alvin Ailey in 1958 as a troupe celebrating African-American culture, and then led to even greater international heights by Judith Jamison, a renowned dancer in the company who was tapped by Ailey to take over.

Five years ago, Jamison picked Battle to replace her.

ROBERT BATTLE: I think she thought that this was right for the company, that I would sort of push the boundaries of what people thought was possible.

JEFFREY BROWN: In his prominent new role, Battle has opened up about his own boundary-pushing, including in a new children's book. He barely knew his birth mother, was taken in by an uncle and aunt and raised by a cousin.

He was severely bow-legged as a child and wore metal knee braces until he was 6. Bullied in his dangerous Liberty City neighborhood, he turned to martial arts for confidence, and then, and forevermore, to the arts, music and then dance.

ROBERT BATTLE: Sometimes, I think young people see people in certain successful positions, and they think, I don't have the tools for that.

And what I'm saying is, you do have the tools for that.

JEFFREY BROWN: What made you think you did, when you look back at that young child you were?

ROBERT BATTLE: I don't know. I always felt that I was guided. I always felt this sort of maybe — some people would call it this third eye. I always felt that the sense that I was looking down over myself within the context of the rest of the world.

And so I had this sense that I was supposed to do something. I remember that early on, from growing up in church, watching the preacher preach. And something about that, and watching the rest of the congregation respond and be uplifted, I wanted to do something like that. In fact, I used to imitate the preacher. I would put on my bathrobe at home.

My great uncle would always tape the services, and I would learn the sermon.

JEFFREY BROWN: Really?

ROBERT BATTLE: Yes.

JEFFREY BROWN: Leading the congregation, but also the performative side to that as well clearly attracted you.

ROBERT BATTLE: Yes. Yes. Yes.

And what's interesting, and the flip side is, I was painfully shy. I didn't like school because I didn't like being sort of an extrovert. But when I took on these sort of roles, I could be bold.

JEFFREY BROWN: I'm thinking of the child wearing the leg braces, right, to straighten your legs, and then dance.

ROBERT BATTLE: Yes. Yes. And it comes from the restriction, and then...

JEFFREY BROWN: Take the braces off and start going.

ROBERT BATTLE: Yes, yes. It's not enough to walk. You have to run, leap even.

Often, when young people say to me, you know, I want to be a dancer, I want to be like that, I said, well, start where you are, start exactly where you are. If you want to be a dancer, consider yourself a dancer, and move from that space. Your imagination costs you nothing, but can cost you everything if you don't use it.

JEFFREY BROWN: Fast forward, the problem is how to leap into the future while holding onto the past.

Battle is doing this by bringing new dances to the company from a varied group of choreographers, including recently at Washington's Kennedy Center Ronald Brown's "Open Door," a vibrant Latin jazz romp, and a very different dance choreographed by Battle himself, titled "No Longer Silent," set to the music of Erwin Schulhoff, a German composer who was silenced and then killed by the Nazis.

ROBERT BATTLE: Sometimes, I feel a little bit of guilt when I go to take my seat in the back of the theater to watch the audience consume this work.

JEFFREY BROWN: Guilt?

ROBERT BATTLE: yes, because I don't want to bring them down, you know?

JEFFREY BROWN: Are you also a little afraid of how they're going to accept it?

ROBERT BATTLE: Yes. Yes. And I'm very sensitive to that. I see everything when I'm sitting in the back of the house. I can see if somebody's, like, looking down at their phone, or somebody's tilting their head not in a way of interest, but in a way of saying, what's going on up there?

JEFFREY BROWN: You really sit back there and watch for this?

ROBERT BATTLE: I try not to, but I can't help it.

JEFFREY BROWN: Yes. But this goes back to what we were talking about earlier, where you have got an audience, you have got a tradition.

But you're also — you feel it's important to give them something else.

ROBERT BATTLE: Yes, definitely. Definitely. And I have to make my own statement about how I see the world. I have to. In some ways, I would rather be silent.

When I was a kid, I had a high speaking voice. And so every time I said anything, people would laugh, you know, the other students. He talks like a girl, you know? So, I didn't want to talk in front of people.

I'm still that person. But what I know is, it is necessary, that I'm here for a reason, to tell stories that celebrate our common humanity.

JEFFREY BROWN: Robert Battle says his newest dance, the first he's choreographed since taking over the company, reflects part of his own story. He calls it "Awakening."

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is now in the midst of a 20-city North American tour running through May.

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Jeffrey Brown.

GWEN IFILL: You can hear more from Robert Battle about the connection between dance, history and contemporary social issues on our Art Beat page. That's on our Web site, [PBS.org/NewsHour](http://www.pbs.org/NewsHour).

Watch video here:

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/historic-dance-company-prepares-for-new-steps/>