As the performing arts emerge from the challenges of the pandemic, the Dance Magazine Awards celebrate those who have made our field even stronger. With the selection committee’s continued focus on diversity, we honor the artistry, the integrity and the resiliency these living legends have demonstrated over the course of their careers. Join us to celebrate this outstanding group virtually or at the Guggenheim’s Works & Process Theater on Monday, December 6, with performances and presentations for each honoree. Find tickets at dancemediafoundation.org.

Robert Battle

Robert Battle once told an interviewer on PBS, “Something about movement, very early on, signified life.” As a young boy, it was unlikely that he would become a dancer. Battle’s legs were so bowed he had to wear braces at night. However, once he no longer needed them, he made up for lost time by dancing every chance he could. When he wasn’t dancing, he liked to don a baseball hat and pretend to preach, sharpening the oratorical skills that he now uses to regular use as artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Today, the warmth and charm of his pre-curtain speeches and interviews make not just Ailey but modern dance feel more accessible than ever.

Diligent and versatile, Battle trained at Miami’s New World School of the Arts, then Juilliard. He danced with Parsons Dance before starting his own company, Battleworks. His choreography, including the iconic ‘Taodomine and The Hunt’, tends to be challenging, powerful, inspiring and sometimes offbeat. Many works are punctuated by moments evocative of his martial arts training.

When Judith Jamison passed the Ailey torch to Battle in 2011, she named 58-year-old Battle the third artistic director of the historic dance company. Since then, Battle has forged several pathways for other choreographers to flourish. Right away, Battle established the New Directions Choreography Lab, giving emerging artists the resources to create new works. Under his leadership, Ailey has also expanded its storytelling to include dynamic choreographers, such as Kyle Abraham, Aszure Barton and Wayne McGregor. Outstanding dancer Jenor Robins became the company’s first female choreographer in 2015. A year earlier, Battle had hired Rennie Harris as Ailey’s first artist in residence; through Harris’ works, such as the now-famous Lazarus, the Ailey company has further delved into the richness and diversity within African-American culture, and broadened the vocabulary with which it does so.

Battle often quotes Alvin Ailey: “Dance comes from the people and should always be delivered back to the people.” During Battle’s tenure, the Ailey Brand has remained synonymous with authenticity, artistic integrity, inclusive storytelling and culture of the highest quality. Through its steadfast grace, humility, wit and authenticity, Battle has helped the Ailey company, 60-plus-years on, to continue evolving, flourishing and growing ever more popular. —Nadine Matthews