Pandemic revived Ailey dance company director’s own creativity

BY SARAH L. KAUFMAN

When he became the artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater 10 years ago, Robert Battle stopped seeing himself as a choreographer.

“In fact,” he said in a recent phone interview, “there were parts of me that didn’t really think I would make another work.”

Paradoxically, making work is precisely why Battle had landed at Ailey in the first place in 2011. It was his skill as a choreographer and director of his own small troupe, Battleworks Dance Company, that caught the attention of one of the world’s most prestigious modern-dance organizations. Judith Jamison, Battle’s champion and predecessor at Ailey, hailed him as “the creative force of the future.”

It has taken years for Battle, 49, to muster the nerve to create again.

He made a piece for the company in 2015, but since then, leadership responsibilities crowded out the artist in him: raising money, choosing repertoire, overseeing the internationally touring company as well as its junior troupe, Ailey II, and the Aliley School. Promoting the vision of founder Alvin Ailey, who died in 1989, and expanding the Black-led, Black-centered organization he left behind. Carrying on the legacy.

There also was an inherent intimidation factor. Battle was regularly bringing in established, first-rate choreographers to create premieres. Could his own work measure up?

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BY ELLA FATTAL

A generates a new装甲 of subscribers. When the company's virtual gala last June, to be streamed online temporarily, and Bette surprised herself by turn

"It was low pressure, for me," she says with a smile, "but I wasn't shown once, I didn't think of it as a priority.

What emerged was "For Four" a piece for four dancers collaborated with music, and the director saw movies in his head. Then an open

"I wish we could have done more," she says. "We couldn't afford to do it, but it's something we want to try in the future.

She had asked of the dancers: "What do you have here?"

But that boiling energy came from the thrill of being back in the studio. Battle says, "We've done a lot of fun stuff in the past. It's good to have time for that.

"The kind of music that is needed to make work," Battle says, "is a big part of what we do. It's a way to express ourselves and give the audience something that's personal to our experience.

Then the pandemic made everybody else and myself a bit more aware of the space and the people around us. So, the dancers came back and started working together again.

"When I look at these images of us dancing together," Battle says, "it's like a dream come true. It's something that we've been waiting for for so long.

"I wish we could do this again," she adds, "but it's not something that we can plan for now. We'll have to see what happens in the future.

"I can't wait to see what happens next," Battle says. "I'm excited about the possibilities."