Weekend Confidential: Choreographer Robert Battle Believes That Dance Brings Connection

By: Emily Bobrow
June 11, 2022 (Online: 6/10/22)

Robert Battle was around 12 years old when he first saw dancers perform a work by his pioneering, Black choreographer Alvin Ailey. "It was a revelation," he recalls. As a bullied child with artistic ambitions, he found it dazzling to see people who looked like him earn applause for telling the story of the African-American experience through movement. "I understood that what was going on was a lot more interesting and entertaining," he says. "They were expressing themselves through the music and dance, and I felt a sense of pride.

Never did Mr. Battle imagine that he would one day lead Ailey's company, the internationally acclaimed Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AATP). "That wasn't even on my radar," he says as he drives from his home in Manhattan to the company's downtown studio.

As he celebrates his first decade as AATP's artistic director with a national tour that stops at New York's Lincoln Center this month, Mr. Battle, 46, says he is finally ready to exhale. "I spent a few years always waiting for the other shoe to drop, for someone to find out and go, 'You don't know what you're doing,'" he admits. Although his predecessor, Judith Jamison, told Mr. Battle she had appointed him to lead AATP because of his "singular vision," he says it's only recently that he learned to trust what's in his head and heart: "Now I'm ready to lean in.

Mr. Battle grew up in a loving but unconventional home in Liberty City, one of the poorest parts of Miami. He never met his father, hardly knew his mother and lost his siblings to foster homes. His great aunt and uncle took him in as a baby, corrected his severely bowed legs with braces and raised him with the help of their daughter, a pianist, who offered lessons to him free. "Music," he says. "I learned that the bonds of family could be both strong and tumultuous. Perhaps that's why I was always looking for where I belong," he says.

Mr. Battle's earliest ambitions as a child were to become a preacher, after he felt "something" when he heard a particularly charismatic one preach. "I thought, I want to be like that," he remembers. "He memorized sermons and performed them at home for myself and my imaginary congregation." With hindsight, he sees that this was his first exposure to the power of storytelling. "I always say it's not so different from what I do now.

A bright child, Mr. Battle amazed his real situation was revisited the classroom. His mom introduced him to the poetry of Langston Hughes and Lewis Caroll, the music of Sarah Vaughan and Nina Simone, and the films of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. He loved them all, "but that kind of stuff got you boot up in Liberty City," he says.

He learned to tolerate being called a "ugly" and "ugly," and "those are the names I can repeat," and he had to carry a hammer to defend himself. Many of the men in his life pushed him to "toughen up," but he knew he was already tough. "I understood why I was looked at as ugly, but somewhere inside me was a determination that I could not be deterred," he says.

One of Mr. Battle's teachers, a precocious retired ballerina, paid for him to take ballet classes after school and on weekends starting when he was around 8. He recalls asking if he could one day be the "first black lady" to dance, she said, "You can be whatever you want to be.

At the New World School of the Arts, a magnet high school in Miami, Mr. Battle found he had performed modern dance for the way it pruned "making people feel something" over technique. He also cultivated mentors "who went beyond the classroom and gave me the courage to explore." He planned to stay in Miami for college, but on a whim, he went to a local audition for Juillard, and the school hired him to New York by offering to cover his tuition and living costs. "It was thrilling," he says.

Upon graduating in 1986, Mr. Battle secured a coveted spot in the Parsons Dance Company. "When the troupe's choreographer, David Parsons, noticed he was "always making things, always fiddling around with movement," he asked Mr. Battle to create a dance for the company. "It was the first time I'd done something like that, and it went very well," Mr. Battle recalls.

He says he likes when people notice that his "dance are very musical." "I want people to hear the dance and see the music," he explains. "I want them to feel the energy of the music and see how it influences the dancers.

One commission led to another, and in 1999 he left Parsons to start his own company, New York City Ballet, which began touring internationally in 2002. Soon Mr. Battle heard he had played the music of Jean-Christophe Novelli, who was looking for a successor at AATP. He figured the job was going to go to someone with better connections and a longer resume, but after a lengthy vetting process, Mr. Jamison called him before the search committee, grabbed his arm, looked him in the eyes and said "you're it.

Mr. Battle admits he was stunned. Mr. Jamison, who was with Alvin Ailey when he died from AIDS-related illness in 1998, had long said that his last breath was an inspiration. "It felt like she literally took his last breath and put it in me, that's where the weight fell in that moment," Mr. Battie explains. He was 31 when he assumed the job in 2003.

In his first years as artistic director, Mr. Battle says the stakes felt higher for everything he did. He noticed that critics were more critical of work they had previously praised, so he decided to curate and commission dances instead of choreographing them himself.

"I realized I needed to take a bigger view of what was needed to move the company forward instead of being consumed by my own artistic expression," he explains. What fell right for AATP was also an act of self-preservation. "I wanted to protect the works that came out of this shy boy who wanted everything with his teacher after class.

The pandemic halted the company's touring schedule for nearly two years, but it also gave Mr. Battle the chance to create. "It was the first time I'd spent that much time not on the road, and I could finally hear my voice," he says. He choreographed "For Four," an energetic piece of shoes by Wynne Saunders and was inspired by the experience and the "response. I really still had some things to say," he says. "I know I'm just where I'm supposed to be.

Although Alvin Ailey founded his dance company in 1958 as a place for Black dancers to tell black stories, the troupe has been culturally integrated since 1985 and widely popular. "Something of the spirit of the original dance in that connects us to once in the past, the present, the future and to each other," explains Mr. Battle. He helps, adds, that at a time of increased polarization, dance has "the humor of ambiguity," which allows viewers to see what they want to see in the work. "When we are trying to do is celebrate our common humanity," he says. "Where words fail, dance speaks."