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By Andrew Alexander

## A venerable institution changes hands as “Revelations” celebrates 50



The Alvin Ailey company always makes a stop at the Fox on its annual North American tour, but this year is different for two reasons. First, the company is celebrating the 50th anniversary of its signature piece, “Revelations,” and, just as monumental, the company is about to change hands.

It is not a small change. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is one of the largest dance organizations in the world, with an annual operating budget close to \$30 million, a \$54 million center for dance in New York, two professional companies, a school, studios, classes, tours, fund-raising events, new works, repertory, arts education, community programs and more. And as if that's not intimidating enough, the company was previously led by two of the most beloved icons of American dance: Alvin Ailey and—after his death in 1989—Judith Jamison.

All of this will fall into the lap of the young and relatively unknown choreographer Robert Battle this summer when Jamison retires. We caught up with Battle in anticipation of the company's performance at the Fox, February 10-13, to get to know the new face of the Alvin Ailey company and to ask about the huge leadership role that's in front of him.

### **Can you tell me about the first time you saw an Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performance?**

I was about 14, and we were bussed to the Jackie Gleason Performing Arts Center in Miami for a small performance for young people. That was my first time seeing the company live, which was an incredible experience, seeing something so amazing, but also so connected to my up-bringing, having grown up in the church. My mother played for the church choir and I sang in the church. Seeing “Revelations” was in some ways seeing myself and a reflection of myself and my culture. It was riveting. Absolutely riveting. Like nothing I had ever experienced. It left an indelible impression on me. So here I am today, doing a lot of reflecting on that moment and what images can mean.

### **How did you originally start dancing?**

I started dancing partly because I was singing... I was studying voice, and my best friend was studying dance, so we would exchange what we were learning. I would tell him whatever songs we were learning and he would tell me all these French words for movements. “This is a *plie* and it means bend your knees. First position, second position.” So I had some orientation. It was also during a time where imitating Michael Jackson was a big thing, in the 80s. When “Billie Jean” came out, it was like the Beatles for people of a different generation. We were just riveted by that. We used to go around and imitate Michael Jackson; we'd dance at parties and all that. I had a certain affinity for dance, so when my voice started to change I auditioned at my school for dance. I studied different art forms, but dance is the one that stuck. It encompassed all the other arts.

### **You were a boy of 14 watching the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and now here you are 24 years later about to take the reins. Could you talk a little about that path?**

That path was from New World School of the Arts in Miami, Florida, to auditioning for the Julliard School in New York which came recruiting when I was a senior. It was the one and only college audition I did. And then they sent the bill and realizing I couldn't afford it, I called the school and they said, “What if we offered you a full scholarship?” In 1990 I came to New York to study at Julliard. In the summers, I would study at the Ailey School. That's how I started to become connected to the Ailey family. When I graduated from Julliard, I danced with the Parsons Dance Company for seven years. During that time I choreographed on the company as well. That was important because Sylvia Waters who runs the junior company saw my work and she commissioned me to do some work for the



second company. (One of them is the piece we'll be performing in Atlanta called "The Hunt.") During that time, Judith Jamison saw my work for the second company and asked me to create for the first company. That began that relationship. I subsequently created more and more for them. And here we are!

**Can you tell me how you heard of the death of Alvin Ailey and your thoughts at that time?**

I remember that. I was still in Miami in high school at that time. That was one of the companies I was so excited about. *The* company I was most excited about. In some ways, being a young person, hearing about his death, to me I didn't know the next steps of the company. To me it was the death of the company. I didn't connect that the company would go on. I remember that feeling. Of course it was very sad. It sort of came out of nowhere. I had a video tape of an Alvin Ailey special. I watched it over and over again. When it happened, it just seemed unreal to me.



**Alvin Ailey and Judith Jamison are both huge icons of American dance. This must be a very exciting, but also very intimidating moment for you.**

I guess it has to be intimidating in some sense, but long ago I guess I became less enamored with celebrity. I realized these were people. I admire people because of their work and because they inspire me. And those are not always famous people. Of course, these *are* famous people, but on a deeper level there is something else for me to be in awe of, not just fame. In this process, what strikes me more is the human being who overcomes obstacles in order to do what they believe. That human quality is what I connect to. People can decide to put other people on pedestals, but that's usually from the outside. But when you look at Alvin Ailey: here's a person who grew up poor, who grew up at a time of great struggle in our country, who was able through his own beliefs in something greater to leave a legacy to the world. That inspires me. I feel that the things I love and believe in are very similar to what Mr. Ailey and Ms. Jamison believe. Dance comes from the people and should be delivered back to them, their desire to nurture new talent and young artists, their inspiration

to other people... I see reflections of myself, which gives me a certain amount of humility but also a certain amount of courage. The fact that Judith Jamison looked at me and said "You are the one to take this company and lead it forward," there can't be a greater endorsement than that. I have a good mix of courage and intimidation... When I got the news that I had the job, Judith Jamison and I went to see *Fences* with Denzel Washington on Broadway. We were sitting there and right before the lights went down and the curtain went up, she looked at me and said "You know there's the first company, the second company, the BFA program, the school, etc.. You realize you're going to be in charge of all that?" And I looked at her and I went, "Yes." And then the curtain went up.

**One of the pieces we'll be seeing in Atlanta is "Revelations" which premiered 50 years ago. Why do you think the piece has become such a touchstone in American culture?**

Now that I'm starting to travel with the company—I was with the company for five weeks in the UK and one week in Tel Aviv last year—I have to tell you that the reaction is the same. That to me is a true testament to the power of "Revelations." No matter if you're across the street or across the ocean, you connect to the humanity of the work. Everybody knows something about trial and tribulation, hope and despair. So there's some connection. It doesn't matter if you've been to a gospel church, if you know the songs, or if you know the words. You know the feeling. It leaves everyone up-lifted in one way or another. I think that's why it's endured. It is a great American masterpiece. It's in the fabric of our country and certainly now it belongs to the world. People always want to see it. I remember sitting in the audience and sitting behind me was this very small child with her mother and the curtain started to go up on "Revelations." They were talking, which usually annoys me, but the young girl said, "Mom, is this it? Is this 'Revelations?'" It had something to do with it being passed down. It is tradition. It was quite amazing. That's a great feat for any work of art.

*Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will perform at the Fox Theater Thursday, Feb. 10 at 7:30 pm; Friday, Feb. 11 at 8 pm; Saturday, Feb. 12 at 2 pm; Saturday, Feb. 12 at 8 pm; and Sunday, Feb. 13 at 3 pm. The program varies at each performance, but "Revelations" will be performed as the final piece in each show. For more information or to purchase tickets, starting at \$20, call Ticketmaster at 800-745-3000 or visit [www.alvinailey.org](http://www.alvinailey.org) or [www.foxtheatre.org](http://www.foxtheatre.org).*