

Legacy

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Robert Battle:

A mother shares the story of the humble beginnings of Alvin Ailey's Artistic Director

BY TRACI CLOYD

Miami native Robert Battle will be in Moscow next month when he officially becomes the Artistic Director of the legendary Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Russia is a long way from the heart of Liberty City, where he grew up. His mother, Dessie Williams, still lives there. Every chance he gets he credits her with helping him "arrive." It was Williams who encouraged him, Williams who drove him to dance lessons, Williams who nurtured him from the time he could remember, through Miami Northwestern High, The New World School of the Arts, Julliard, on to the Parsons Dance Company, and it was Williams who helped him name his own company.

Williams said, "Robert, your name should be in it, you've worked hard all your life", and Battleworks was born. Dessie Williams is a Christian woman, an active member of A. M. E. Zion Church. She is beautiful, refined, educated, a retired teacher with a spirit, energy and love for the arts so unrestrained, it is impossible to spend time with her and not be uplifted and inspired. It's no wonder Battle has made the leap onto the world stage, with Mrs. Dessie Williams' mothering, encouragement and guidance.

How could he not? She's a poet, thespian and exceptional raconteur. She recites Shakespeare, adores actress Bette Davis and performs monologues from Davis' films with such timing and elocution, Davis herself would be proud. During the 70s, Williams was a founder and member of a trio of poets, "The Afro Americans," so named, said Williams, "to reflect the time when 'Negroes were coming into their Blackness.'" They performed all over Miami. Robert Battle watched those performances closely. It was the start of his love affair with the arts.

Williams said, "As a child Robert was quick to embrace poetry and theater, Robert loved the things I loved." Not all his relatives understood. At least one feared he was wasting his time and would never get a job when he left Miami for New York, asking, "What is this Julliard operation?"



Dessie Williams

Battle literally walked into Dessie Williams' life. She saw him for the first time at her parents' house in Fernandina Beach, Fla. She remembers the toddler with crippled legs, a dirty diaper and a runny nose. She said her mother and father, Anna and Willie Horne, deserve the credit for Robert's success: "It was they who decided Robert deserved a real family life."

The Hornes took custody of Robert from his biological mother, a relative with a racy life. Williams wasn't happy when her aging parents told her, "We have a baby" because she knew that meant she had a baby. She reluctantly brought him home with her to Liberty City, then fell in love with Robert, in a hurry.

His education started with her teaching Robert gorgeous stories from a Basic Reader. "He knows and loves music, all kinds," said Williams, who remembers with fondness introducing him to jazz legends. "I wanted to make sure he knew Sara Vaughn, Billy Eckstein, and I took care to know that he knew Dinah Washington."

His love of poetry and art made him an easy target for bullies. Williams steered him to karate lessons after a boy next door tried to hang Robert from a tree. His martial arts training is part of the inspiration for his highly acclaimed work "The Hunt," a powerful, percussive piece for six male dancers.

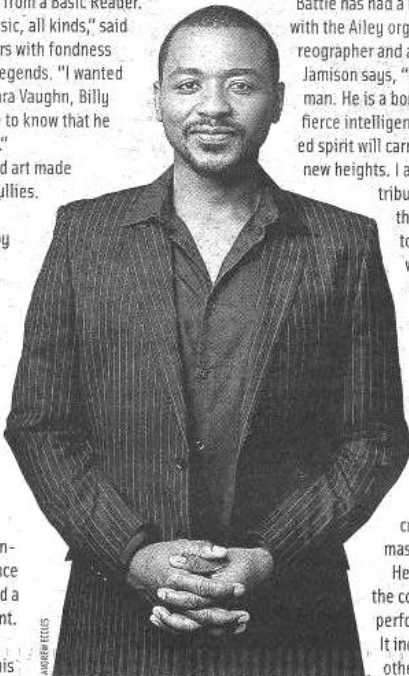
Williams says karate lessons early in life were the reason Robert had such incredible extension when he started dance lessons. "He also just had a natural love for movement. He used to dance around here, tie sheets around his

neck and jump off the back porch," said Williams. To this day there is a section of a wall right off the back porch where Battle, at 9, prophetically scraped what he thought would be his future job, "Dance Boss." Now he is the Artistic Director of one of the world's most well-known and beloved dance companies. He always had a vision. "I always trusted in everything that was inside myself," said Battle. "I was encouraged at a young age to have dreams and to express what I felt. We sang in the household. We had a piano, my mother played piano. We all sang. It was a way of life. I always knew if I followed that, it would lead me to where I was supposed to be, so here I am."

Battle is now only the third person to lead the company since Ailey founded it in 1958. In 1989, before he died, Ailey asked Judith Jamison to take over the company. She's now become the bridge between Ailey and Battle. Jamison has said of Robert, "He reminds me of Alvin."

Battle has had a long association with the Ailey organization as a choreographer and artist-in-residence. Jamison says, "Robert is his own man. He is a born leader whose fierce intelligence and open-hearted spirit will carry this company to new heights. I am moved by the tribute he is paying in this, his first season, to his elders in the world of dance, by the thrilling new journeys he is preparing for our dancers and audiences, and by the love and support he is offering to his fellow choreographers as they strive to create tomorrow's masterpieces."

He has just announced the company's 2011-12 performance season. It includes, among other works, the world



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Judith Jamison and Robert Battle.

premiere of a dance by hip hop choreographer Rennie Harris, inspired by stories of people living with or affected by HIV, a new production of the "Solo Journey" by Joyce Trisler, who was an early member of the Ailey Company, and a new production of Alvin Ailey's "Streams."

He has also announced the start of a major new initiative, "The New Directions Choreography Lab," created for the benefit of virtually everyone in the dance community. It will help young dancers learn to work with choreographers and give choreographers the chance to develop their work with no pressure and no strings attached. Each year, four emerging and mid-career artists will receive fellowships, a stipend, the use of gifted dancers from the Ailey School, creative mentorships and rehearsal time at the Joan Weill Center for Dance.

"The New Directions Choreography Lab" is a departure from other programs for choreographers. It does not require the production and presentation of a new work. Battle believes the lack of a deadline will free choreographers from the restrictions that can come with a commission and allow them to embrace a true creative experience. He's clearly excited about it.

Battle said, "This is the beginning of a new adventure for the company, for me and our audiences around the world. We are going to reach back and try to touch some of the vital sources of Alvin Ailey's creativity, but also stretch forward into new possibilities that develop his legacy. For the millions of people who love Alvin Ailey's work and have been inspired by the great achievements of Judith Jamison and our unsurpassed dancers, I hope this season will be just what the company, has always promised: revelatory."