

HOTTEST TICKET



Alvin Ailey dancers pose in Robert Battle's "The Hunt"

a modern movement

THE ESTEEMED ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER, LED BY A NEW ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, COMES TO LAS VEGAS FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 15 YEARS. BY EMMA TROTTER

Once the Smith Center opens on March 10, Las Vegas will be exposed to a new world of touring companies of Broadway shows, as well as dance, comedy, and music that culture lovers used to have to venture out of town to see. Among the first marquee acts to perform here: the renowned Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, on March 20 and 21, as part of the troupe's four-month, cross-country tour.

An elite group of dancers with roots in the African-American cultural experience, the prominent New York City-based company has performed all over the world. Although Ailey II, its second company composed of emerging young talent, has performed in Las Vegas in the last 10 years, the main company has not appeared here since 1997. But now, locals and tourists will get to see the modern movements of the celebrated Alvin Ailey dancers first-hand. Each night will feature different works from their repertoire, with the company's signature piece, the world-famous "Revelations," as the grand finale.

"Revelations" expresses some of the dark parts of our country's history—segregation, racism—and how we overcame that through our great faith," artistic director Robert Battle says. "It's extremely important

to us to not just entertain, but also to educate, and that's what we do. Dance is a universal language, our passport around the world."

Since Battle took over last summer, he has shaken things up at the 54-year-old company. He is the company's third artistic director, succeeding only Ailey himself and the famed Judith Jamison, who presided from 1989–2011. Before he was appointed, Battle choreographed nine works for Alvin Ailey dancers, including "In/Side," "Takademe," and "The Hunt." Those three works will be part of the Vegas performances.

The modern dance for which Alvin Ailey is so recognized and revered is a conceptual style open to interpretation. The works generally do not adhere to a plot, as a story ballet would. And unlike most dance companies, Alvin Ailey does not use a ranking system, so there is no promotion to principal dancer and the plum roles that such a title usually guarantees.

"Modern dance in and of itself was more about activism and social statements," Battle says, "and about the fact that we are all human beings and are all connected because we have the same issues, hopes and dreams, desperation, sadness. That premise is why we don't have that kind of ranking system." As

artistic director, Battle strives to stay true to Ailey's original vision while adding a contemporary flair. "I think the dancers are dancing with a new kind of vigor," he says. "Everything feels fresh and headed to the future."

Many of the new works are cutting-edge by groundbreaking choreographers. "Home," by the award-winning Rennie Harris, showcases stories of people living with HIV/AIDS. Ailey himself died of AIDS in 1989, at the age of 58. "It has really given me the opportunity to think more about Alvin and his death and figure out a way to talk about HIV/AIDS," says dancer Rachael McLaren, 26, who has been with the company for four years. "Home" incorporates hip-hop and house music and is a soulful interpretation of people's explanations about how HIV/AIDS has affected their lives, McLaren says.

Referring to three other works the troupe will perform in Vegas, Kirven James Boyd, 27, an Alvin Ailey dancer for eight years, says, "'Takademe' and 'The Hunt' are always crowd favorites, and 'Episodes' is a brilliant piece, choreographed by Ulysses Dove, that is challenging physically, technically, and emotionally." Another new work, "Arden Court," was choreographed by the legendary Paul Taylor, a pioneer of modern dance who inspired Battle

during the latter's performing career. "It is a really beautiful work with a bunch of solos and duets, and dynamic music," McLaren says. "It's a lovely modern piece and uses a lot of ballet inflections. But my favorite piece is the sexy battle-of-the-sexes piece 'Episodes.' Everyone is in black, and there are a lot of shadows and shafts of lighting on the stage. It is kind of dark."

The company, officially recognized by Congress as a cultural ambassador to the world, has brought its artistic magic to cities large and small. And Battle says the troupe would not have it any other way. "The idea that we can go into smaller, different communities and bring the gift of dance is one that we treasure," he says. Now, after a 15-year absence, the company is eager to return to the entertainment showplace that is Vegas. "It is going to be interesting to see how we are received there," Boyd says. "I have a lot of friends who trained in ballet and modern dance who are actually in different shows in Las Vegas. So I know, as far as an art community, there is definitely that. I am hoping

that they'll come out to see us and support us." *Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs at the Smith Center, March 20 and 21 at 7:30 pm. 361 Symphony Park Avenue, 702-982-7805; thesmithcenter.com* ▼



Alvin Ailey company members Kirven James Boyd and Rachael McLaren