BY JORDAN LEVIN
photo: Miami Herald

In the last five years, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's annual performances have become a highlight for dance and performing arts lovers. But for growing numbers of Miami-Dade schoolchildren and aspiring young artists, the troupe has become something more: a source of pride, inspiration and hope as the company builds its connections to Miami.

That is largely due to artistic director Robert Battle, a graduate of New World School of the Arts raised in Liberty City, who is strengthening connections between the world-famous troupe he began leading in 2001 and the city that, in many ways, still drives and inspires him.

"It feels so cathartic when we're there..."

TEACHING MOMENTS: Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, above right, leads a workshop at Charles R. Drew Middle School. Top photo, Taetlor Dalton, 13, works with her group.
Alley troupe leader deepens his Miami roots

that I thought it would be great to be there longer and have more of a presence," Battle said from Washing-
town, D.C., where the troupe was performing at the Ken-
dy Center on the tour that will bring them to the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts Thurs-
day through Sunday. "It's connected to that feeling of giving back, and it feels di-
rect in Miami because it's so connected to my roots."

In addition to their regular shows, the Alley troupe will do weeklong residencies at Charles Drew Middle School in Liberty City and South Dade Senior High School in Homestead. Alley dancers, including New World School of the Arts graduate Jamar Roberts, will teach master classes at New World and the Arsht Center. On Friday morning, the company will give its first performance for Miami-Dade public school students, with more than 2,000 being bused in for the show (much like the field trip that enabled Battle to see the company for the first time when he was 14). A number of them will be graduates of Al-
ley Camp, the summer program for middle school students that teaches discipline and self-esteem along with jazz and modern dance, also in its fifth year in Miami.

For the 21 aspiring girls dancers in the Revelations Residency at Charles Drew, learning firsthand from the Alley company is a powerful experience. One recent morning session, led by per-
er Alley dancer Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, included a short technique class and practicing the morning's I Wanna Be Ready solo from Alvin Alley's famed gospel dance Revelations. But Thomas-Schmitt demands more than even that intense physical effort. The girls add "focus" and "discipline" to a list of words that represent dance to them, from "pas-
son" and "discipline" to "streets" and "Beyoncé." They work on a poem and choreographing a dance. They discuss a biography of Alley, with Thomas-Schmitt drawing connections to his life and theirs; he went to church on Sundays, was raised by a single mother, discovered dance on a school field trip.

"The important thing for them is to look at this man and see parallels in their own life," Thomas-Schmitt says. "A lot of these young people are told they can't do things. ... We give them a platform to have a voice and be heard."

The parallels these girls feel to the company's cur-
rent director are even more powerful. He grew up in

LEARNING THE MOVES: Jakirah Davis, right, 13, feels the beat at a workshop.

their neighborhood. And they are all the more im-
pressed by what he's done because he has brought that success home to them.

"It makes me feel proud to be from Miami," says eighth-
grade Taelor Dalton, 13. "Knowing that someone from here who became fa-
mous in New York, that he's remembering where he came from and trying to give something back in dance."

"It makes me think that no matter what your back-
ground you can make it," says Jazmine Edgeworth, 14. "Someone from New York came to me and said, 'What's Miami have? I can finally say, 'Don't say I can't make it. Because Robert Battle came from here.'"

BATTLE'S MEMORIES

For Battle, inspiring girls like Jazzmine and Taelor and confronting memories of his own struggles in Miami are both reasons to return. A choir singer and piano stu-
dent before he started dancing in Northwestern High School's arts magnet program — which many of the Charles Drew dance stu-
dents will attend — Battle was shy and often bullied. He studied martial arts and put a hammer in the dance bag he carried walking to school through some of Lib-
erty City's worst neighbor-
hoods. That tension is still visible in his choreography for dances like Strange Ha-
mors, an intense, symbiotic male duo the troupe will perform in Miami, and The Hun-
t, a fiercely bellissimo dance for six men.

ROBERT BATTLE: 'Coming home again is not only invigorating but totally necessary.'

Observing: Nahirra Henderson and Unique Worlds, both 12, on the sidelines.

But Battle's memories of the mentors who fostered him at Northwestern and New World are just as pow-
erful as those of isolation and fearfulness. In bringing Alley's resources to Miami, he is both proclaiming his triumph and assuring others they can succeed too.

"It's me, yes, and you can too," Battle says. "All those memories are there rooted in Miami. ... The fears, the
tenaciousness, the curiosity — I didn't leave it behind. Something about coming home again is not only invigo-
rating but totally necessary. I think when you lose those roots and turn your back on even the painful part, you in essence lose yourself. I can't do that and be a leader for anyone. So it's both selfish and selfless."

The Alley company will perform several new pieces in Miami that show how Battle is begin-
ing to put his stamp on the troupe. One is Petite Mort, by European contemporary ballet chore-
ographer Jiri Kylian, a witty, sexy dance that attracted Battle in part because he thought it would let the dancers show a new side of themselves and to put their own, weightier stamp on the neo-classical choreo-
graphy. Another is From Before, an abstract modern dance by iconoclast Garch Fagan, which drew Battle for the way it conformed as as-
sumptions about the Jamaican choreographer's work.

"When you hear about [Fagan's] background, that has expectations around it," Battle says. "I feel he's defied those expectations by being himself."

"SOMETHING MORE"

Jamar Roberts, who will teach one of three master classed led by Alley dancers this week, didn't have Bat-
tle's struggles. A prodigious natural talent and imposing figure who joined the troupe just over a year after gradu-
ating from New World's high school in 2000, Roberts has been one of the company's stars. But he still feels con-

If you go

What: Alvin Alley Ameri-

Center for the Performing Arts, 1300 Biscayne Blvd., Miami

Information: Tickets $25 to $70 at www.arshtcenter.org or 305-
949-6722

When: 8 p.m. Thursday, 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday — "Petite Mort.

"Grace: In Silence, Revela-

"Strange Humors," "Minus One"

Where: Ziff Ballet Opera House, Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, 1300 Biscayne Blvd., Miami

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