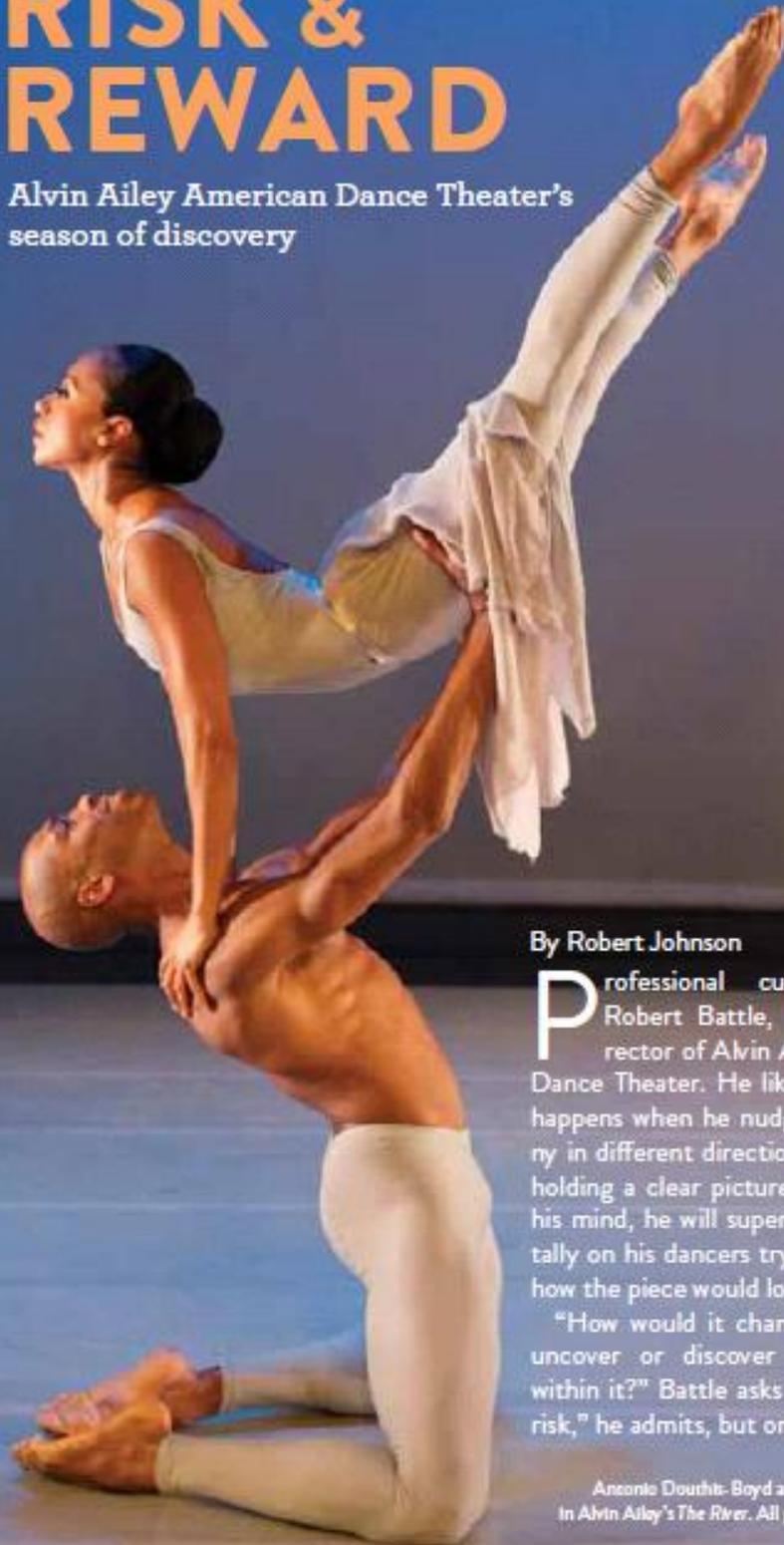


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## RISK & REWARD

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's  
season of discovery



By Robert Johnson

**P**rofessional curiosity drives Robert Battle, the artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. He likes to see what happens when he nudges the company in different directions. Sometimes, holding a clear picture of a dance in his mind, he will superimpose it mentally on his dancers trying to imagine how the piece would look.

"How would it change? Would we uncover or discover another layer within it?" Battle asks himself. "It's a risk," he admits, but one that has paid

Anonte Douthett-Boyd and Linda Celeste Sims  
in Alvin Ailey's *The River*. All photos by Paul Kolnik.

off handsomely since the artistic director began his investigations widening the company's repertoire with unexpected choices.

This year, for its annual run at New York City Center, December 4 to January 5, Battle has reached across the Pond to acquire a dance originally created on Britain's Royal Ballet. Wayne McGregor is among today's most prominent contemporary choreographers, but his work *Chroma* was made for dancers with classical lines. By bringing it into Ailey, Battle underscores the company's versatility and the dancers' rock-solid technique.

The Ailey company premiere of *Chroma*, made possible in part by the generous support of New York City Center, marks

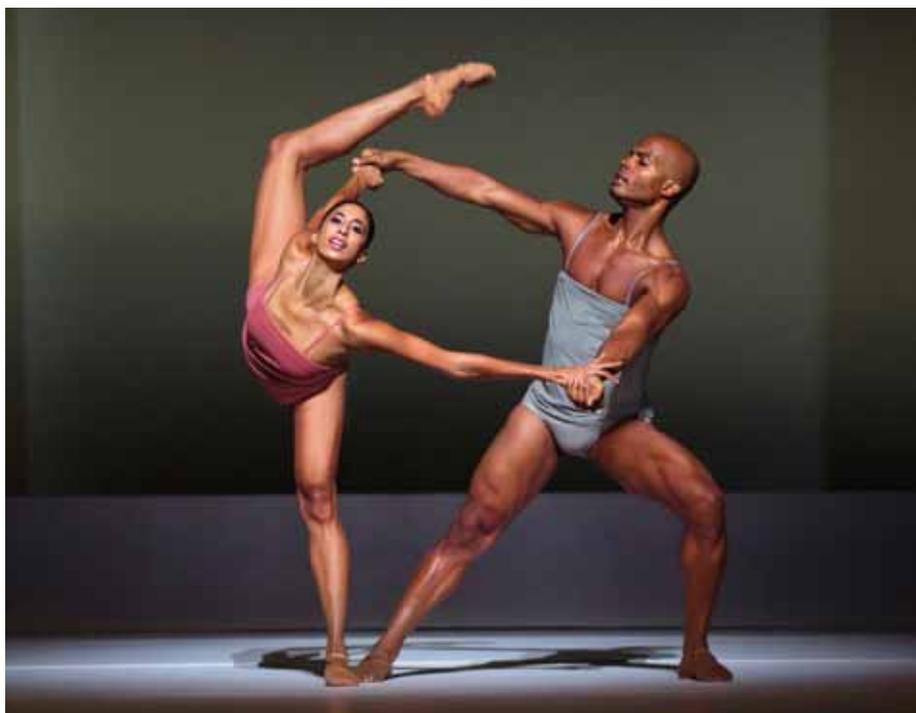
the first time a work by this multi award-winning British choreographer will appear in the Ailey repertory. The piece will receive its Ailey premiere on opening night, as a counterpoint to *Revelations*.

Battle says he enjoys giving his dancers an opportunity to invest in a trendy movement idiom like McGregor's, which they may have seen and admired but never thought they would have the chance to tackle themselves. "The important thing is to keep them on their toes, and on the edge of their discoveries with works that challenge them," Battle adds.

The audience should get a jolt, too, from seeing the Ailey dancers in a new setting. Unlike most pieces in the company's repertoire, *Chroma* features an



Linda Celeste Sims and Jamar Roberts  
in Aszure Barton's *LIFT*.



Alicia Graf Mack and Vernard J. Gilmore in Wayne McGregor's *Chroma*.

elaborate framework by architect John Pawson, who locates the squirming action within a giant, white rectangle.

Speaking of the way McGregor juxtaposes ballet tradition with sudden twists of the dancers' shoulders, or butting movements of the head, Battle says, "I love those blurred lines, and his intensity. And I love his intellect, too."

Another surprise import this year is *D-Man in the Waters (Part I)*, a contemporary masterpiece by choreographer Bill T. Jones. Although Jones received encouragement from the late Alvin Ailey, who commissioned a dance called *Fever Swamp* from him in 1983, the Ailey company hasn't performed *Fever Swamp* in more than a decade; and much of Jones' oeuvre is either too grand—filling up a whole evening—or perhaps too startling for mainstream audiences. Don't expect to see the Ailey dancers scampering nude through

his *Continuous Replay* anytime soon. Nonetheless, Battle admires Jones' guts as well as his talent. "When you see someone has the courage to speak their truth," he says, "that is inspiring."

While *D-Man* is most definitely a dance with a social conscience, in it Jones strikes a balance between politics and pure dance. Janet Wong, who staged *D-Man* for Ailey, recalls the tragic circumstances of this work's premiere in 1989, when, to fulfill a promise to dancer Demien Acquavella (the *D-Man* of the title), Jones carried the dying man onstage. A year later he succumbed to AIDS, his once-proud body seemingly melted away.

Today, Acquavella's absence remains poignant. "There are holes in the piece that were never filled," Wong says, describing, for instance, a moment in which couples occupy all the corners of the stage but one—the one where Acquavella

once stood posted. *D-Man* is so subtly crafted, however, that viewers may not notice someone is missing.

Although *D-Man* recalls the horrifying early years of the AIDS crisis, it is anything but a dirge. Instead, this athletic piece filled with images of people sliding, swimming and diving celebrates the courage to go on living at full tilt no matter how grim the circumstances. For Jones, creating this dance was about survival.

Only his own Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company performs the full work. Ailey will present the 15-minute-long first section, beginning on December 11. *D-Man* is set to Felix Mendelssohn's joyous *Octet for Strings*, and Wong notes that "without knowing anything about the history of the piece, you can enjoy it as a dance."

Naturally, the Ailey season will also feature new and recent creations. Last

summer, Battle commissioned a splashy premiere from celebrated dance maker Ronald K. Brown for the troupe's appearance at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Brown's *Four Corners*, set to music by Carl Hancock Rux and Yacoub, takes viewers on a spiritual journey in which angels stand guard over the earth, and Biblical imagery blends with Yoruba legends. This sprawling dance returns on December 19 as a jewel of the company's City Center season, with powerful roles for company stars Linda Celeste Sims and Matthew Rushing. It also features a relative newcomer, Belen Pereyra, while sparkling individuals break out from the dynamic ensemble.

Battle had given his latest commission to emerging choreographer Aszure Barton; and a heartbeat runs through her *LIFT*, which will receive its premiere on December 6. A self-professed addict of



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Bill T. Jones' *D-Man in the Waters (Part I)*.

rhythm, the choreographer says a particular beat acts as a through-line connecting segments of the dance that otherwise conjure varied atmospheres and emotional states. She describes these imaginative locales as “different worlds.” Barton has collaborated with a fellow Canadian, composer Curtis Macdonald, who developed his score alongside her choreography. The music’s instrumentation combines saxophone, kora and percussion with natural sounds recorded during a residency in the mountains at the Banff Centre, in Alberta. The choreographer says what inspired her most, however, was the distinctive energy of the Ailey dancers. “I felt that was so exhilarating,” she says. For Barton, the creative process is key. “I’m not one to have a fixed concept going in,” she says. “The

work becomes a result of the atmosphere that’s created in the studio. I’m interested in collaborating with the dancers, and building something together.”

The title of her piece suggests how satisfying this shared act of discovery can be. “Every day I left rehearsal feeling this ‘lift,’” Barton says, describing the sensation as “an openness in my heart which was both scary and exciting.” She hopes audiences will feel it, too.

While encouraging the audience to try new flavors, Battle notes that popular works make up the bulk of Ailey’s home season. This year, the company will offer freshly burnished productions of two masterworks by the company’s founder, both with music by Duke Ellington: the beloved *Pas de Duke*, and *The River*. Both



The Company in Aszure Barton's *LIFT*.



Belen Pereyra, Glenn Allen Sims, Linda Celeste Sims and Matthew Rushing in Ronald K. Brown's *Four Corners*.

these dances (like *Chroma*) were originally created with classical ballet dancers in mind. They will be featured on an Ailey/Ellington program that opens with the sizzling *Night Creature*, beginning on December 13.

In addition, the Ailey season pays tribute to a favorite son with a special program, "Celebrating Matthew Rushing," on December 17. Though he became rehearsal director in 2010, this veteran dancer continues to give suave and gorgeously understated performances. Battle says Rushing has the ability to make each moment fresh, no matter how many times he

may have danced a particular work. More than that, "He has this incredible way to translate soul," Battle says. Watching Rushing dance, "you almost aren't aware of the physical being, but just the spiritual being," Battle continues. "He's just a really great artist."

*Robert Johnson is a freelance writer and dance critic for The Star-Ledger in Newark, New Jersey. He has written for many publications including daily newspapers and scholarly journals, and is currently working on a history of Garth Fagan Dance.*