

Q&A with Alvin Ailey American Dance leader Battle as it readies for Fox Theatre tour stop

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By Howard Pousner

As only the third artistic director of the famed Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater since its founding in 1958, Robert Battle carries the weight of history on his shoulders.

But Battle, a choreographer and leader of his own rising dance company when he was hand-picked to lead Ailey in 2011 by his predecessor Judith Jamison, hardly considers that history a burden. That's even as he works to ensure the African-American dance troupe is relevant in 2015 and is evolving to embrace its future.

For a few reasons, history was very much on Battle's mind in an interview ahead of Ailey's annual tour stop at the Fox Theatre from Wednesday to Feb. 15. The company is bringing with it a new work, "Odetta," Matthew Rushing's tribute to the powerful folk singer whose music has been called the soundtrack of the Civil Rights Movement. And Battle accepted the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, from President Barack Obama last November on behalf of Ailey, who died in 1989.



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, featuring Hope Boykin (center), in Matthew Rushing's "Odetta," a new work to be performed during its annual tour stop at the Fox Theatre from Feb. 11 to 15. CONTRIBUTED BY MICHAEL STRONG



Robert Battle, artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. CONTRIBUTED BY ANDREW ECCLES

The upbeat Battle freely discussed all that and more.

Q: Atlantans seem to treat the Ailey dancers more like family than visitors. Do you sense a special bond between the company and the city?

A: Yes, I believe so. There's something about the soulfulness of Ailey that I think really connects with Atlanta audiences. There's the call and response of the performances, of course, that harkens back not only to African-American tradition but African tradition. There's a back-and-forth between the audiences and the dancers that is palpable (in Atlanta).

You get a sense that the audience there really feels that this is their company: "This is *our* Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater." I'm the interloper, in my position, not having danced with the company. I feel that strong sense that they don't have to go through me to get to the company. Not that I'm not welcome. It's as if you're walking in on something as opposed to presenting something (new). There's that connectedness.

Sometimes I like to sort of stand and hide in the (Fox) lobby and watch the way people come through the front doors, and you get that sense that they're visiting a friend, catching up, you know.

Q: Has your agenda as Ailey's leader changed over the last three-plus years?

A: It becomes more focused and clear — in terms of trying to express the versatility and the beauty of the dancers as a compass, as opposed to thinking of it as just expanding the repertory. I think it's also really more personal than that

in terms of my feelings about the dancers and everything that they're capable of. And sort of really giving them the platform to express that, it's more clear to me now that that's important.

Q: How big of a challenge is it to balance respect for the past with the need to push the company forward?

A: In some ways, I think if you allow the history to be the catalyst, seeing what has been there, you can see what's possible. ... It's kind of the way I choreograph, starting with what's there and then saying, 'OK, how can I inhabit this differently without completely ignoring what is there?'



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Antonio Douthit-Boyd in Ulysses Dove's "Bad Blood," to be performed at the Fox Theatre from Feb. 11 to 15. CONTRIBUTED BY STEVE WILSON

I think it's balance and that's what's great about the fact that we are a repertory company, because you can balance everything on a program from folk songs to Mozart. There's that sense that you're always dealing with past, present and future. There's no sense that it's one detached completely from the other.

But having said that, certainly there are going to be times where I make choices where some people think, 'I'm not sure about that one.' That happens, but I think all for the good. What's important is having the courage to make choices that are not always going to land easily but can begin to open the door to other possibilities in the future. It's not instant gratification for everything. It's not a sprint, it's a marathon.

Some of those works that make their way into the repertory perhaps in time make way for other works that will be challenging

in the future, and at that moment it will come to be (more) expected. (It's) building the appetite for that kind of adventure while reassuring that we haven't lost our mission and the things that make the company great.

Q: Tell me about what hit you at Odetta's memorial service in 2008 that led you to feel that her life and music could make for a contemporary dance?

A: First, just the resonance of the story of using your art to open the door for change and better understanding. That's what drew me to dance and the performing arts — that I could hear a song and be moved to tears. And there's something about the way that the blues is not so much about being sad but getting happy. There's something about her artistry that reminds us of the power of the performing arts, the power of the voice, the power of whatever your talents happens to be as a way to really move people.

Anytime I see something that's enlightening to me, I want to share it, I want people to have this revelation that I'm having. And so I remember sitting there and (as I heard the recollections of Maya Angelou and others about Odetta), I thought, 'Oh my gosh, I've got to share this with everybody.'

Q: Matthew Rushing acknowledged in a TV interview you two did in New York that he really didn't know her music well, that it was going to be an education for him. Was that daunting for you, that the choreographer you hand-picked to do the work was not someone who had grown up with Odetta's music?

A: That's a good question. Who wrote the book, "Yes I Can" — was it Sammy Davis (Jr.)? We as dancers and performers, we have this thing, you just say, "Absolutely, of course I can. Of course I know it."

(Rushing) didn't tell me right away, "I don't really know it." He said, "I love her music!"

I remember I didn't tell him why I was asking. I just said, "Matthew, do you like Odetta's music?"

He said, "Oh, yes, absolutely, I *love* her music." (Laughs)

He told me later on that then he went and (immediately) started working on it.

I remember a dancer from when I had Battleworks (Dance Company). She had gone on an audition for a show, and she got past the dancing part and then the person asked, "Can you do fire breathing?"

And she said, "Oh yeah, of course I can."

And they said, "OK (there will be fire breathing) when you do the callback."

So now she was trying to figure out how she was going to study a crash course in fire breathing! There have been greater miscommunications...

Q: But is it safe to say you're happy with what he came up with?

A: I think that's what makes the dance both innocent and a journey, because he was going on a journey discovering her and to also think of her journey to discover her place in the world. I don't know her enough to say this, but I can imagine that (at first) she just wanted to sing. And (life) slowly revealed to her what her purpose would be and what her voice would do for so many people. I think him discovering it as well gave (the dance) a certain innocence that wasn't preconceived.



Battle with his predecessor Judith Jamison in 2010. CONTRIBUTED BY PAUL KOLNIK

Q: What was it like to accept the Presidential Medal of Freedom for Mr. Ailey?

A: It was such a huge moment — for me, growing up and having to have been taken in by my great aunt and great uncle when my mother and father weren't able to provide at that time. (I thought of my great uncle) Willie Horne, already in the winter of his years, born in 1904, and some of the wounds that he suffered internally from segregation and racism and bigotry, that he didn't always talk about but that you just knew.

And then seeing Alvin Ailey's life, his death, his mission. And then I'm looking out at Judith Jamison and how she carried it and then put it in my hands.

And then I'm thinking about the president and all that he has to endure, regardless of what your politics might be. But some of the treatment is, I think, more racist than it is political. And I think of how he's still able to have grace in the face of all that.

People who are heroic that way, we don't often get the chance to look them in the eye or to stand beside them. I didn't get a chance to look Odetta in the eye and think about what it's like to be in her position in the world. And Martin Luther King Jr., I didn't get a chance to see him. And when I was standing there with the president, I couldn't imagine the weight of that responsibility. So there was something also very beautiful about that moment.

I felt his weight, I felt my own, but I also felt Alvin Ailey's presence saying, "You can do this, you know, and let me be an example."

Yeah. (Battle exhales and collects himself for a moment.)

Q: I'm sure you had thought about what was going to happen before you got to the White House, but it sounds like there was more to the experience, that it was more emotional than you had expected?

A: Exactly. In my position, often I'm accepting honors on behalf of the company or on behalf of Mr. Ailey or Miss Jamison. Sometimes there's a lot of rigmarole and you just have to put one foot in front of the other. And of course when you're at the White House there's a lot of check points and "Stop here" and "Walk there" and "Go in this room." So I was just functioning based on what I needed to do. I was focused on the outline (at first) as opposed to what was happening.

And all of the sudden (during the ceremony), it just welled up. And I took it back to the personal. I did think, if my great uncle were alive today, just the fact that I was there at the White House would've been overwhelming for him. And I think that came in my psyche and it was a very moving moment.

You sometimes feel you're standing there for him, too.

Dance preview

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

8 p.m. Wednesday-Friday, Feb. 11-13. 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 14 3 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 15. Tickets start at \$25, with several specials offered (see www.alvinailey.org/atlanta). Fox Theatre, 660 Peachtree St. N.E., Atlanta. 1-855-285-8499, www.foxtheatre.org.