



## **One On 1 Profile: Artistic Director of Alvin Ailey Dance Theater Robert Battle Boldly Fills Big Shoes**

March 9, 2015

By: Budd Mishkin

The name Alvin Ailey resonates with dance enthusiasts around the world. The man who runs Alvin Ailey, following in some rather large footsteps, is Robert Battle. NY1's Budd Mishkin filed the following One on 1 profile.

Robert Battle is the third artistic director in the almost 60-year history of one of New York's most historic cultural institutions.

"There are still moments when I'll be being introduced on stage, and they'll say, 'Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater,' and I'm waiting for the name. (laughs) You know?" Battle says.

After almost twenty years as a dancer and choreographer, Battle took over the position in 2011, replacing a monumental figure in American dance, Judith Jamison.

There were moments of doubt.

"I think if there wasn't, that you're in the wrong business if you think, 'I got this. I'm cool,'" he says.

Through the 2000s, Battle frequently choreographed performances for the Ailey company, but he'd never been a member of the company. Any potential "outsider" view of him was erased by the support he says he received from people who knew Alvin Ailey personally.

"These people are people that were in his hospital room when he took his last breath. They are saying to me, 'This is where you're supposed to be. Alvin would have loved you,'" Battle says. "That's all I need to know."

At the Joan Weill Center on Ninth Avenue that houses Ailey's studios and offices, Battle is able to watch rehearsal in person and on a monitor in his office.

"Sometimes, if you have a choreographer that you've invited, that's working on a work, you don't want to be there looking over his or her shoulder," he says.

The company spends much of the year touring around the United States and internationally, and finishes the year with a four-week season in New York, showcasing new dances and "Revelations," Ailey's most famous piece about the African-American experience.

Battle first saw Ailey and "Revelations" as a 12-year-old growing up in Miami.

"Because of the outreach that the company does, we were bused to Miami Beach, Florida to the Jackie Gleason Performing Arts Center as little loud kids coming in the theater to see a mini-performance of the company while the company was on tour in Miami, and I saw 'Revelations,'" he says.

A moment that Battle witnessed shortly after he was named artistic director reaffirmed for him the importance of "Revelations."

"The daughter was saying, 'Mommy, is this it? Is this "Revelations?"' She said, 'Yes, this is it,'" he says.

"There's something about that little interaction is why we keep doing works that still resonate with the audience. But then, it affords me the ability then to show them whatever I want to show them."

One of the new pieces at Ailey is called "Uprising," a dance about urban unrest

"I knew that it would be challenging. What I didn't know is that on the night that it opened, that the Eric Garner verdict of not to prosecute would happen and people would be taking to the streets," Battle says. "I think for any creative institution, the absence of risk, it's not art. You have to have, you have to take those chances."

"Whether someone likes a dance or doesn't like it, I always say that 'like' is just an option on Facebook these days. I wouldn't worry too much about it. It's the long view, not the instant gratification, that builds a legacy."

Robert Battle grew up in Liberty City, a poor section of Miami.

"In Liberty City, most people have bars on the windows. On our front porch, the bars were inverted so they were on the inside of the house," he says. "So I used those bars as ballet bars."

His biological mother was unable to raise him, so he was brought up by his great-aunt and uncle, whom he referred to right away as mother and father. After his great-aunt died, her daughter took on the role of mother.

"I felt blessed," Battle says. "I think I felt because of my upbringing and because of people who stepped in to help out, I think that's why I'm in this position in the first place."

His parents made sure he was surrounded by the arts, right from the time he woke up.

Battle: She'd fling open the curtains, and she'd look at me, and from Macbeth, she would say, "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time and all our yesterdays have lighted fools away the way to dusty death. Get up, Robert!" So when you grow up like that, you either—

Mishkin: You get up.

Battle: You get up.

In 1990, he won a scholarship to study at Juilliard.

"My mother, she left little notes in my suitcase and anywhere, in pockets, you know, things like, comforting things like 'Don't look and stare at the buildings' and 'Don't look up because people will know you're not from there and they'll rob you,'" he says. "So for the first couple of months, I was like (moves eyes back and forth)."

"I was a freshman. I knew what there was to know, so don't talk to me about how to do a plié. I know how to do a plié, I've been doing pliés forever. And they kind of break you down a little bit."

Not long after Juilliard, Battle received a phone call, asking that he choreograph pieces for the Ailey company. Any early doubt about his future in the industry was gone.

"There's a sense that you are making it when you get that phone call," he says. "And then on a practical level, as much as this company tours and your work is going to be seen by so many thousands of people, when that goes on your resume, that means something to people."

Fast forward more than a decade, and Battle was at the White House, accepting the Presidential Medal of Freedom for Alvin Ailey posthumously from President Barack Obama.

"That was an out-of-body, unreal kind of experience where I say I get in touch with that little boy that sees the company for the first time and how it almost feels like there's no time in between," he says.

Alvin Ailey led the company for more than 30 years. Judith Jamison led it for more than 20. Robert Battle says he intends to be around for a long time, but right now, all he's thinking about is what's right in front of him.

"Every year, when I get to hire a new dancer and to see the look on their face when I get to say to them, 'Welcome to the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater,' and to see the tears and the cheers, it is something that I can't imagine ever getting tired of," he says. "Amazing."



Watch Here:

<http://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/one-on-1/2015/03/9/one-on-1-profile--artistic-director-of-alvin-ailey-dance-theater-robert-battle-boldly-fills-big-shoes.html>