



## **Review: For Alvin Ailey's annual Fox run, the thrill of the new and the comfort of the old**

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It's been nearly five years since Robert Battle succeeded Judith Jamison as artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

As with many changes in an arts organization's leadership, there were questions. At 38, would he demonstrate strong leadership and clear vision? Unlike Jamison, Battle hadn't been an Ailey company member, though he'd staged several works on the troupe. Could he lead the organization into the 21st century while keeping the spirit and mission that helped make it one of the most visible modern dance companies in the world?

Over the past few years, Battle has expanded the company's repertory significantly, with works ranging from contemporary ballet voices of Jiri Kylian and Wayne McGregor to postmodern-influenced work by Kyle Abraham; from modern dance revivals by Garth Fagan and Ulysses Dove to some of Paul Taylor's masterworks.

If the goal was to stretch dancers' abilities, preserve historic works and expand audiences' conception of what modern and contemporary dance can be, that plan appears to have succeeded. Some works have stretched dancers more than others, but this season's repertory seems to be a just-right fit. Pieces by Rennie Harris, Paul Taylor and Ronald K. Brown, as well as two Battle works and three new Ailey revivals, seem well-suited to the dancers' extraordinary technique and performance qualities.

But until *Awakening*, one more question lingered: When would Battle create new work of his own? He has restaged four existing pieces, but could he shoulder the job's administrative responsibilities and remain the facile choreographer his existing repertoire showed him to be?

With Battle's *Awakening*, which debuted in New York last December and in Atlanta Thursday evening, Battle has shown he is every bit the artist and director who'll lead the company forward.

The program opened with Ronald K. Brown's *Open Door*, inspired by travels to Cuba and set to music by Arturo O'Farrill and the Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra. It is Brown's newest piece and his sixth for the Ailey troupe. True to its name, the music was a fusion of influences. Brown's choreography picked up on that cultural blend, flowing seamlessly from Afro-Cuban movement to modern jazz dance — from rolling, pulsing spine undulations to free-flowing spiral turns punctuated by arms striking clean perpendicular lines.

Rays of intense color splashed across the cyclorama, modulating from dark and intense to warm and bright, like sunlight on the buildings of Havana. Dancers continued moving through a language that flowed with ease between urban breaking; rumba; salsa and references to the Santeria god Elegba, who opens pathways. It was a joyful, free-flowing expression — softly playful, but ever reverent.

It is always special when the Ailey company revives *Cry*, the history-making solo Alvin Ailey choreographed for Judith Jamison in 1971 and dedicated to “all black women everywhere — especially our mothers.” Staged by Masazumi Chaya and performed by Jacqueline Green, the solo is profoundly emotional and powerfully relevant today.

To Alice Coltrane's “*Something About John Coltrane*,” Green, in a long white dress, crisscrossed the central stage, carrying a white swath of fabric. She manipulated it to create various images — a vestment, perhaps; then shackles; a cleaning rag; a head wrap. Her hands vibrated against the air, as Laura Nyro's devastating song, “*Been on a Train*,” began to play.

Green's character watched a man die of a drug overdose; she cried out in the angular, reaching lines of each taut contraction and release. To “*Right On, Be Free*” sung by The Voices of East Harlem, we followed her from despair into energized dignity and triumph.

*Battle's Awakening* is just what the company needs — choreography with new force and thrust, showing the birth of a leader as a visually stark, densely textured, urgent rite of passage. Like composer John Mackey's score, *Battle's* work references the past with angular, ritualistic movement, recalling perhaps Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, but with an up-tempo drive, a technologically savvy look and sharp-edged contemporary feel.

Long-limbed and muscular, Jamar Roberts danced as the chosen one, moving powerfully in and out of the white-clad group. At first a kind of reluctant warrior, Roberts emerged and was absorbed by the cluster of people; finally, he realized and accepted his role, responding as much to the group as he did to Al Crawford's changing lights — at first, an elusive ray from above; later, hundreds of tiny, blue-white lights.

*Awakening* has a drive, a thrust — its unpredictable rhythms and complex formations told of the turmoil of birth and creation; of the strength and weakness of human ties; and the summoning of power from a natural force, whether of new plant life bursting out of the ground or of the energy of pulsing light. It was sharp, violent and cinematic, with floor patterns brilliantly conceived — a brusque statement about assuming leadership that seems to have transformed and empowered *Battle*.

After *Awakening*, Ailey's *Revelations* showed signs of its age — its lighting seems to have yellowed like a treasured old sepia photograph. But Ailey dancers consistently vivify the classic, even as new works — like *Awakening* — catapult the company forward.