



Local Dancer Takes Her Talents to Alvin Ailey

By: Audrey Levine Blumberg

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She tried a number of different sports growing up in Bridgewater, but it was dance and ballet that truly made her feel alive.

Now, Bridgewater resident Rachel Yoo has joined Ailey II as a first-year member of the second company to the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

“Nothing was satisfying an unknown hunger in my soul until I discovered ballet,” she said of beginning her classical ballet training at age 11 at the New Jersey School of Ballet. “When I first began, it was hard, I was evidently behind on my training.”

Yoo said she cried after her first week, but the fact that it was so difficult and uncomfortable may have been what made her continue.

“Today, dancing makes me feel most at home in myself,” she said. “As we love to say, it’s the purest expression of our humanity. There are also never-ending sprouts of growth to discover.”

The company was founded by Alvin Ailey, and continues his mission of establishing an extended cultural community that provides dance performances, training and community programs for all people.

In the two-week season for the company, from March 23 through April 3, Yoo performed in three programs, as well as the special



Rachel Yoo. Photo by Nir Arieli.

celebrating Robert Battle’s 10th anniversary program that pays homage to his leadership and journey with Ailey that began in 1999.

From the age of 11 to 18, Yoo trained at the New Jersey School of Ballet under the direction of Carolyn Clark. In high school, she attended the Somerset County Vocational & Technical High School, part time in the dance program.

Over the summers, she attended intensives at Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, Parsons Dance and Peridance Blueprint. Then she attended Fordham University/The Ailey School for her Bachelor of Fine Arts in dance, with a minor in business administration.

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"I apprenticed with Peridance Contemporary Dance Company my senior year," she said. "Following graduation, I worked with McKoy Dance Project and Barkin/Selissen Project, along with other freelance work in the field."

Yoo said auditioning for the second company to the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater was done on a whim. Recent graduates of Ailey received an email about virtual auditions for the company, she said, and she figured she had nothing to lose.

"And I'd love to work with Francesca Harper, the current director," she said. "I danced for them in my apartment living room and received an in-person

callback."

But, Yoo said, the universe was not on her side to move forward.

"It was the morning of the callback, and I still hadn't received my COVID test results back, which was needed to enter the building," she said. "I went to the Ailey studios in hopes that the test would miraculously come right before we started, but I had no such luck. I left that morning a little defeated and disappointed, but I told myself, on to the next opportunity as we must in life."

Lo and behold, Yoo said, she got a call a couple days later that Ailey II wanted to offer her an apprenticeship, which she accepted.

"But the story doesn't end



Rachel Yoo. Photo by Nir Arieli.

there," she said. "After my first week in Ailey II as an apprentice, Francesca called me and she offered me a full contract with Ailey II. It was absolutely surreal, and I accepted right away."

The experience, Yoo said, has

been indescribable.

"The dancers in the space are so passionate, hardworking and talented," she said. "It truly is a special and inspiring group of people. And the artistic team continually pours so much into us. We are making history together."

Yoo said the dancers that inspire her the most on a daily basis are those that are in the studio with her, especially her friends.

"There's something so intimate and inspiring about seeing the growth and passion of my peers as we journey through this art form together inside and outside the studio," she said.

Of her own performances, Yoo said, her standout was with Ailey II in Malibu.

"My grandparents and cousin came to the performance, and many of the company members had friends and family come," she said. "That was such a special, intimate show full of

love."

In terms of her future, Yoo said, she knows everything is possible, maybe she could end up on Broadway one day.

But her vision for herself, Yoo said, has to do with choreography in her work.

"That's the most exciting part of life," she said. "I choose what I do with my life."

Yoo said her advice to other dancers is to diversify themselves and live life, expose themselves to those different from them.

"Go to that museum," she said. "Hold empathy in your heart. And stay true to yourself."

"At the end of the day, everything you do informs you more about your purest self," she added. "And keep going. If this is really the career you want, you will always find some sort of space to dance. It's okay to take space from the art form. Dance will always be there, and you can always come back to it."