



## Amy Hall Garner brings *CENTURY* to Philadelphia with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

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The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has been one of the most renowned dance companies in the world for over 60 years. Legendary visionary Alvin Ailey founded the organization in 1958, bringing his dream of preserving and enriching the African American experience through American modern dance to fruition. Since its inception, Ailey's programs continue to provide opportunities for underserved communities within the world of dance.

Dancer and choreographer Amy Hall Garner debuted her first work entitled *CENTURY* with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. The deeply personal piece was inspired by her grandfather on the eve of his 100th birthday. Garner spoke with the SUN about the importance of hard work and preparation, and her joy in creating and presenting *CENTURY* to the world.

Born and raised in Huntsville, Alabama, Garner began dance lessons very early on. Her love and talent for movement quickly led to a lifelong love of dance.

"I've always been in love with dance," Garner said. "When I was 2 or 3 years old, she [my mother] put me in dance class and I got the bug. My dance teacher saw something in me that I didn't even see in myself and told my mother 'she has a talent for this, she could pursue this as a career. When I got around 5 or 6, she began to see those things you see in students and she began to teach me ballet privately. When she taught me privately, that's when the real love of it came."

"Dance is my first love — now it's my second love behind my child and my family," Garner continued. "It's always been that thing that keeps me going, that's always been in my life. The longest relationship I've had is with dance. It has taken me places I never thought I would go and it has brought me to places I never thought I'd be."

After attending summer programs in New York, Garner went on to attend Julliard, where she found her tribe and decided to pursue dance professionally.

"That was the first time that I had peers that were true artists," she recalled. "I was around people finally that were like me and loved the arts and loved a certain discipline as much as I did. From there, you're in that environment where everything is at your fingertips. You have the best teachers and students around you from all over the country. You're all just on this one little island at Lincoln Center that makes you feel special, and you're just really exclusive with your art form for those four years. During that moment, that's where I kind of made that transition to 'Ok now we're really doing this. We're going to pursue this as a passion and a profession.'"

Garner trained in jazz, tap, ballet, modern and studied musical theater. At 21, a successful audition took Garner down an unexpected career path.

"I auditioned for a show, I ended up getting that show and took that trajectory to do more commercial work," she said. "I never did dance for dance companies, even though that's what I trained for all these years. That audition was before the Ailey audition, and just happened."

"I always knew in the back of my head that hopefully I can get back to the dance company one day," Garner continued. "I never thought I would get back as a choreographer. I didn't go to school to become a choreographer; I went to school to

become a dancer. In the end to know that my steps were already kind of ordered. I was doing the work without even knowing I was doing it.”

Garner has gone on to choreograph for some of the most respected organizations in the world including ABT Studio Company, Columbia Ballet Collaborative, Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet, BalletX, Dance Theatre of Harlem, the Guggenheim Museum’s Works & Process Digital Series and more. She attributes her success and her full circle moment of working with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to years of hard work and perseverance.

“I have been choreographing within the Ailey organization for over 10 years,” Garner said. “I started off with students and their jury solos at the end of the year. I started off doing things like that. Then I was approached to choreograph for the certificate program. Someone saw my work there and I started choreographing on Ailey II. All of these things have been building slowly and it takes time.”



“When Robert Battle, the artistic director at that time, asked me to do a piece for the first company, that’s the ultimate dream,” Garner said. “When you get that phone call, there’s nothing like it! That’s what you strive for. I remember where I was when the phone rang — it was one of those moments. There are so many moments that culminate into that moment and when that moment happens, it’s going to be when it’s right for you. It’s about what you want to say, who you are as a person, where you are in life. I felt the synergy of it, the calmness of it, the energy, the nervousness of it and I felt the preparation was there.”

After the collaboration with Alvin Ailey was underway, the next step was deciding the subject matter. Garner was inspired by the life of her grandfather, and created the piece *CENTURY* to pay homage to him on the eve of his 100th birthday.

“I’m doing the piece and then it was, like, ‘Now what? What am I going to do?’ I asked ‘When will the piece premiere?’ He said it would premiere in our December series at New York City Center in the big New York season. Then a couple of days later, I said my grandfather’s birthday is December 30. We were trying to figure out what to do for his birthday. I wanted to do something special, so I thought, ‘What can I do? He means so much to me and my family. What can I give him? He already has everything. What he doesn’t have is a ballet and that’s something I can give him that’s off the charts special. He’s always been such a supporter in my dance journey, always encouraging me as an artist, asking me about my classes, sometimes financially supporting them — you know, all the things that grandads do.’ So I said, ‘Let me give him something that money can’t buy, something that’s very special to me and him, and something that will hopefully live on.’”

*CENTURY* is set to music by Count Basie, Ray Charles, Duke Ellington, The Dirty Dozen Brass Band and more — music that holds meaning to Garner’s grandfather’s life and legacy.

“I came up with the idea of *CENTURY* because he’s 100,” Garner said. “I want it to be a celebration. I want this to be something that has him all through it. If I were to see it, or my mom were to see it... anyone who knows him can relate to it. So, I started talking to him about music. What kind of music does he like, what music inspired him? Music is always the foundation for me, then I can fly with the piece and figure it out from there. He loves jazz music and he’s from Louisiana — *CENTURY* has those elements. All of that is his soundscape. During the pandemic, my whole family stayed with him for 18 months. We had some great conversations about the journey of life even before Mr. Battle called. It was all aligned. That’s how *CENTURY* started as a celebration, homage and a gift to him.”

“I was trying to hit a lot of check marks with this piece,” she said. “I want it to be celebratory, of course, because it’s his birthday. I want it to be vibrant and just give people joy. Hopefully, they will feel how I feel about him seeing the work.”

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will be at The Academy of Music February 23-25. *CENTURY* will be performed during the tour. For more information on tickets and showtimes, visit: [www.ensembleartsphilly.org](http://www.ensembleartsphilly.org) and be sure to follow @amyhallgarner and @alvinailey on IG