

# LATINA

## Meet Belén Pereyra-Alem, The Dominican Dancer Who's Stealing The Show At Alvin Ailey

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From her early days working at restaurants to pay the bills while she paid her dues, to dancing with one of the world's most beloved dance companies - Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Belén Pereyra-Alem has come a long way.

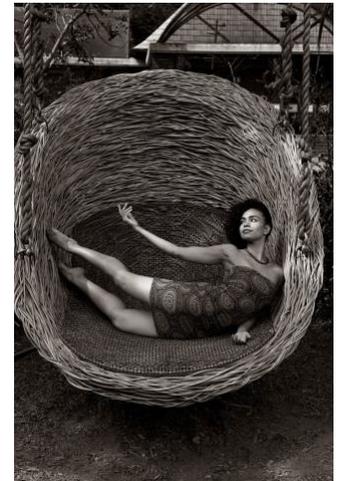
Standing at just 5'3", the 30-year old Dominican-American dancer is larger than life with spirit and soul. This Latina pours all her energy into each performance, fully dancing with an open heart and bringing characters to life on stage in the most magnificent of ways. But the road hasn't always been easy for her. Just before heading out on Ailey's 21-city national tour starting January 30, we caught up with the Inspiring Latina who shares her pride in her Latina roots, her passion for dance, and more than a few inspiring words.

Tell us how your upbringing inspires your passion.

I moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts from the Dominican Republic at the age of four. The first time that I visited the country in 2007, after living in the States many years, made my heart soar. Juan Luis Guerra's music always gave me such a perfect picture of the island. So, when I got a chance to see it on my own, it was a familiar feeling and energy. By the way, I'm obsessed with mangú! Our Latin culture has this rich color with so much vibrancy in the way we speak, dance, walk, even the delicious flavors in our food. Latinos have this zest that I haven't seen in any other culture. We are expressive, like wildfires in the way we do everything. That fire is very much engrained in me, and I have a passion for everything I do. Intellectually, it's what drives me to my mind and soul. I'm able to express myself unapologetically, especially through my dance form. There's this unyielding energy inside of me telling me that there is more to me.

Can you talk about your love of dance?

Dance is the language of the body, and the entire cosmos. It's the field of your own self – a study of your own body, mind, and spirit. Then, you merge this with the genius music and choreography of others among these geniuses of dancers. You make magic together before the audience, and it's all performed live. It's a very scary, powerful, precious and thrilling field that God has given me, and I've met the greatest people through it. It's also been a saving grace for expressing myself in a very delicate, vulnerable way. As a dancer, you become someone else because it gives you the space to explore different sides of yourself that you didn't even know you had. I am so engulfed in the character that I don't exist, and this whole other entity has entered my space. I feel like my soul, body, heart, and mind have evolved into the most beautiful butterfly through dance.



How did you become a professional dancer?

Although I started dancing at the age of seven, I didn't get serious about it until attending Boston Arts Academy high school. I always thought I wanted to dance, but I didn't really know what that meant. When I graduated valedictorian, I sprained my ankle. And, college opportunities and scholarships started falling through. It struck me hard that it might be the end. I thought to myself, "I'd rather die than not to dance!" I was determined to find a way and knew I was born to do this. I was very embarrassed and went back to high school to take the highest-level classes while waiting for the next sign from God. That embarrassment was the biggest blessing at the time because I attended Earl Mosley's Institute of the Arts where I met Camille A. Brown. She invited me to join her company, I moved to NYC, and it trickled the effect. I stopped working at restaurants and took a job at Ailey signing in students. While taking attendance one shift, I wondered which dance company would best suit me. I wanted to travel the world, wanted to challenge myself, wanted to be versatile. I saw an Ailey picture of Revelations behind me, took a long look at it, and decided to audition. After a year of changing my body and technique, I auditioned. I was convinced that was my job, and I was the only female dancer hired during that

audition who wasn't already with the Ailey II company. today, I take Alvin Ailey's legacy and put it in the utmost important space while I'm with the Company. It's what drives me past wanting to be stronger in my work to become my best self all the time. The work challenges you – mind, body, and spirit – and I don't think there is another dance company out there like Ailey. Our dancers and the people we work with are superheroes because of the number of shows we do, during the amount of time, and at the high caliber of skill level that we do it.



Who have been your biggest cheerleaders?

I've always been surrounded by the right people at the right time. My sister, Katheryn Pereya-Caldwell was my first angel on earth. She always had the right words for me, especially when I was thinking of auditioning for Ailey. I wrote down the inspiring words as she spoke them, and placed them on my wall. She was my inspiration to it all, and I did the work. In high school, Musua, Yandje and Muadi Dibinga from the OrigiNation Cultural Arts Center gave me a boost of confidence, endless inspiration, and helped me stay positive. I learned so much from them, and their presence in my life played a pivotal role in the direction of my life. Abraham Alem, my husband, inspires me daily. He lives life selflessly and in the present. I saw him teach his 5th-grade class, and the respect and love he shows his students is unmatched. He's taught me how to love unconditionally, a very powerful way to love, and he inspires me to be a better person.

What advice do you have for young Latinas hoping to follow their dreams?

Learn to love yourself completely. Understand yourself in order to express everything you have to say in this world. Make the changes, and create the life you want – in your relationships, career, and everything else. I don't believe in coincidences. You make this move over here, and the universe makes this move over there. You're creating your existence, co-manifesting your reality. And the atoms in the world are circulating and dancing around each other. Everything is reacting to the partner leading. Everything and every moment is dancing.