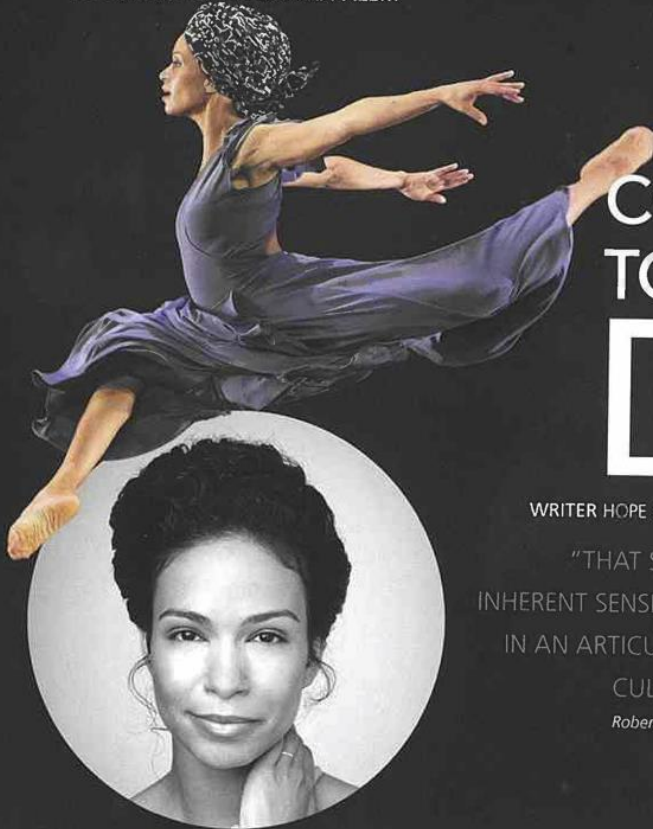


CULTURE // BELÉN PEREYRA-ALEM



COMMITTED TO THE DREAM

WRITER HOPE CUNNINGHAM PHOTOGRAPHY PAUL KÖLNICK AND ANDREW ECCLES

"THAT SOULFULNESS, THAT SYNCOPATION, SHE HAS A VERY INHERENT SENSE OF RHYTHM AND THE ABILITY TO MOVE HER BODY IN AN ARTICULATION THAT I THINK CAN ONLY COME OUT OF HER CULTURE. AND IT REALLY DOES INFORM HER DANCING."

Robert Battle (Artistic Director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater) speaking on Belén

IT IS POSSIBLE SHE WAS BORN TO DANCE.

They say the best dancers have a way of moving that grabs you by the heart. The same is true of Belén Pereyra-Alem. Belén believes that on stage, dance, as an art form, has the power of transformation.

"It feels like the most organic, the most human of the genres," explains Belén, "I feel I can speak a billion languages with my body - and I have A LOT to say!"

Born in the Dominican Republic, the 29 year old Alvin Ailey dancer wholeheartedly embraces her Caribbeanness, her movements reflecting resolute commitment to both her art, and her heritage.

Professional dancing just sort of fell into Belén's lap as a consequence of her mother's love of the arts.

"It was her idea," says Belén, smiling. "It felt like I started dancing more for my mother's enjoyment. My family, like many others, didn't think of dance as a real profession, it was more of a fun hobby."

Growing up in Lawrence, Massachusetts, a diverse region with strong Hispanic influence, she became involved in local Peruvian folk dancing. As a young girl, the love she developed for the craft laid the groundwork for her transition into styles like modern and ballet.

After high school, she says, "I realized this was a dream I had to hold on to and pursue! I had the determination of a billion suns. Although I didn't know where I would end up, I was determined to die trying—I would dance. I had to dance."

Of course in those early years, Belén faced her fair share of ups and downs. She graduated from the Boston Arts Academy as class valedictorian, but then endured a series of agonizing rejections from dance schools she auditioned for before she tried out for Ailey.

"When I got rejected, I always concluded it just was not for me, that something better is coming! I am a true believer that I manifest my reality with my thoughts, words, and choices, so I choose to stay positive."

At the time though, she would sometimes question why, amid such disappointment, she continued to push herself so hard. For her, dreams were not enough, and excuses were not an option. Dedicated to an unwavering work ethic, she prepared tirelessly so she would be ready when the right opportunity was presented. Her audition for Ailey was just that.

As Artistic Director Robert Battle attests, the sense of rhythm informed by Belén's culture was something that made Belén a standout in her audition for the ethnically diverse Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Once accepted, Belén says she felt like she had finally come home, to a place that fully celebrated her creative expression.

"I was able to feel loved, supported, and gain the courage to believe anything was possible."

Now that she's living her dream, her life isn't just about work and positive thinking. As an ode to her Dominican home, she occasionally allows herself to indulge in her favourite West Indian foods, like "rice, beans, chicken, and plantains!" ●