

Dancing While Deaf

By: Rebecca J. Ritzel

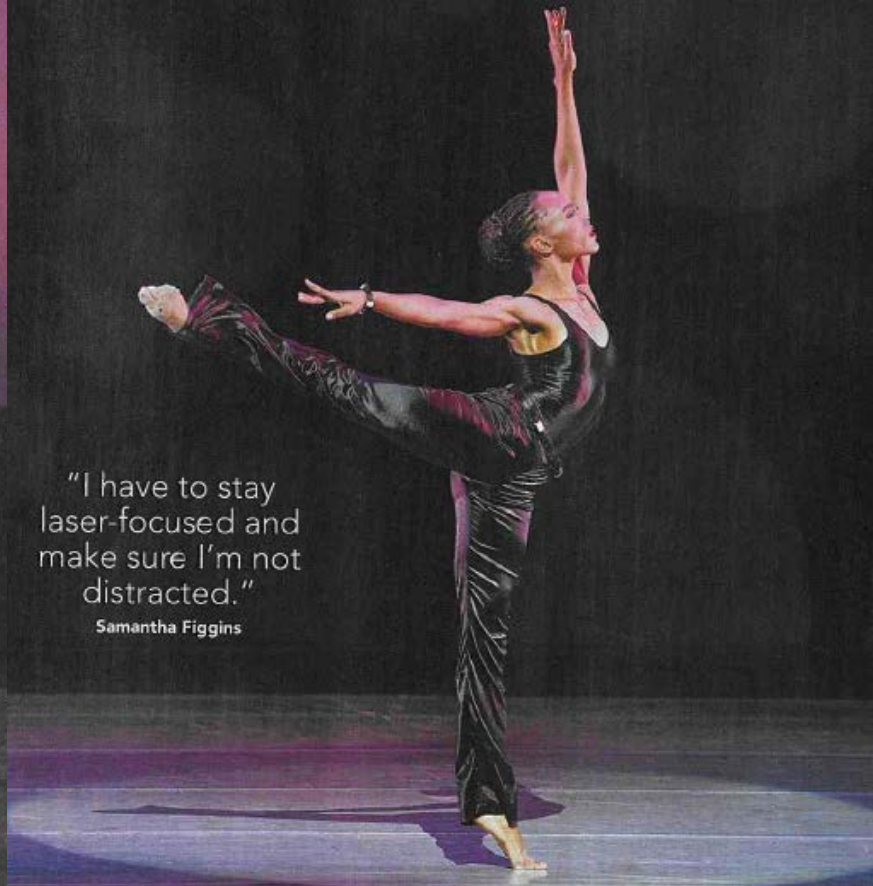
January 2020 Issue

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Samantha Figgins will never forget the first time she danced *Revelations* wearing the small devices held in place by a wire loop over each ear.

"I thought they changed the music," Figgins recalls, laughing. All of a sudden, she could make out individual voices in the opening choral number "I Been 'Buked." When she found herself on the left side of the first formation, she could hear her fellow dancers breathe, and during "Wade in the Water," she discovered a bass line that she never knew was there.

"There's a different texture and sensitivity to my dancing now," Figgins says. "It was a real revelation."

But with the newfound sensitivity has also come a need for more self-care. Figgins continues to reflect on how single-sided deafness has affected her social life and self-esteem, and reserves time for "quiet" moments, when she takes out her hearing aids.



"I have to stay laser-focused and make sure I'm not distracted."

Samantha Figgins

From childhood through high school, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Samantha Figgins trained alongside her twin sister, Jenelle. And when Figgins says "alongside," she's referring to years of strategically positioning herself at the barre so that if her deaf right ear was facing the instructor, she could follow her twin sister. At home and after class, Jenelle (now with Aspen Sante Fe Ballet) would review combinations with her.

"Jenelle was my angel," Figgins says. "I wouldn't be the dancer that I am today without her."

Still, Figgins worried about appearing antisocial to her fellow dancers, when in reality, she never snickered in class because she couldn't hear other dancers' jokes. She also knew that if she lost her place, it would be nearly impossible to catch up.

"I have to stay laser-focused and make sure I'm not distracted," she says. Figgins believes that sense of hyper-focus has ended up being the key to her professional career.

After years of quiet struggles, two years ago Figgins started opening up about her partial deafness, as well as the residual auditory processing disorder and balance issues—all of her injuries have been on her right side—that complicate her dancing every day.

"I'm trying to acknowledge what I'm living with, and really take ownership of my hearing loss, because it's opened up opportunities to connect with people," Figgins says.

Before joining Ailey, she always attempted to "pass" as a hearing dancer in auditions, including when she was hired by Complexions Contemporary Ballet. Three years later, she joined Ailey, but still never

shared her struggles publicly during talks and interviews. The turning point came one night on tour with Ailey in Texas, when a fellow dancer mentioned that a girl with hearing loss had attended the performance. Figgins was still backstage taking her makeup off, but she reluctantly agreed to go meet the aspiring dancer and her mother.

"We shared our stories, and that was the first time I realized it was important for me to be vocal about my struggle," Figgins says. "We were crying, just talking about everything she was going through. I wanted to hug her, and also hug myself."

During last year's national Ailey tour, Figgins volunteered to perform for children in special education programs, but she wants to do more for aspiring Deaf dancers. "Maybe a mental health program, maybe a summer intensive. Something to give them tools to succeed," Figgins says. "I'm working on a lot of things, and I'm still working on myself." ■