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By: Ashley Mahoney

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Charlotte's Constance Stamatiou flourishes with Alvin Ailey dance troupe



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By Ashley Mahoney

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Dance brought Constance Stamatiou to life.

Her journey began as a 5-year-old at Pat Hall's Dance Unlimited off Independence Boulevard, where she took everything from ballet to tap to jazz to gymnastics. Stamatiou returns next week with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at Belk Theater on Feb. 25-26 — 7:30 p.m. curtain. While the Ailey classic "Revelations" is slated for both Charlotte performances, "BUSK" and "Ode" will be performed on Tuesday night, followed by "The Call," "Cry" and "EN" on Wednesday.

"I will be performing another masterpiece by Alvin Ailey, which is called 'Cry,'" Stamatiou said. "It was a birthday gift to his mom, because back then he couldn't shop at these fancy places like Tiffany & Co. or Bloomingdale's. He thought the next grand gesture would be to choreograph a piece. He dedicated it to her and to all the black mothers everywhere. You will really be able to attest to that when you see it, as far as the struggles and the pain that was afflicted upon women back then and to the tribulations and freedom toward the end."

Stamatiou, a mother herself, juggles life as a wife, parent and professional dancer. Yet what made the Northwest School of the Arts alumna choose dance over gymnastics, and why did she pursue a path that led to Alvin Ailey, rather than Dance Theatre of Harlem?

Stamatiou's parents encouraged her to audition for North Carolina Dance Theatre's — today's Charlotte Ballet — annual production of "The Nutcracker" when she was 9 years old. She wanted nothing to do with it.

"I was a little bummed out," Stamatiou said. "I think I even cried, because all I wanted to do was play outside. I didn't want to go to a ballet audition, but that was also the moment in time where my life was

going in the direction that it was meant to."

That audition experience came with a few hiccups, like trying to find a costume and slippers at the last minute. Yet Stamatiou earned a spot in the opening party scene of the production, as well as a full scholarship to further her studies, which led to six years at NWSA. At the same time she was enrolled at the International Gymnastics Center.

"I was considered old to be a gymnast at age 11," Stamatiou said.

She decided to take a break from gymnastics at age 16, which coincided with a question from an NWSA instructor that made her consider her future.

"She asked me an important question, and it was 'what are you planning on doing after high school? Are you going to go to school for gymnastics, and what after that? [Will you] become a coach? Or are you going to go to school for dance, and possibly become a professional dancer?'" Stamatiou said. "That struck me."

Stamatiou knew her heart belonged on the stage.

"I am a performer," she said. "I love to be in the spotlight, so I want to be a dancer."

Stamatiou studied dance at SUNY Purchase in New York for a year, but fate intervened again in the form of a teacher.

"My professor asked me what I was going to do that summer, which was the summer of 2003," she said. "I was like, 'oh, I don't know. I guess I'll follow my friends to Dance Theatre of Harlem.'"

The professor suggested Stamatiou spend the summer with Alvin Ailey, and it was love at first sight. She studied with Ailey II for two years, before joining the first company in 2007.

"There were so many students, and students of color from all over the world," Stamatiou said. "Coming from North Carolina, I didn't really

see that a lot. Wherever I went, as far as training in dance and gymnastics, I always felt like I was the token girl, as one or two minorities on the team or in the class. It was exciting to be able to see a company full of people who looked like me, who danced and travel all over the world doing that."

Stamatiou called her family to share her skepticism about a return to Purchase. Instead, she earned a fellowship to study with Ailey.

"Alvin Ailey is where I belong," Stamatiou said.

In 2011, she took a break from dancing, but returned to the company five years later. In the meantime, she and her husband, Steven Lopez, welcomed a daughter and son—Savannah and Thanos—during her break. Savannah will celebrate her eighth birthday this month, which they will celebrate in Charlotte with Stamatiou's family. She and her brother, who are 19 months apart, both attend The Ailey School.

"Whenever I get to watch them in class, Savannah is so serious," Stamatiou

said. "I was such a goofball. I was shy, but dance is where I came alive."

She described her daughter, who is in the junior division, as extremely focused. They are currently studying ballet and West African dance.

"I love that she is doing West African, and I can tell that she loves it, because it is giving her a little bit more rhythm, and getting her a little bit more grounded, and on the beat more," Stamatiou said.

By comparison, Stamatiou initially was uncertain about how 6-year-old Thanos would take to dance. She has been pleasantly surprised by how he has grown into it.

"When he was three, four years old, he was not for it, but now he is the leader of the class," Stamatiou

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Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater dancer Constance Stamatiou, a Charlotte native and graduate of Northwest School of the Arts, with her children Thanos, left and Savannah Lopez.

Stamatiou at home with Alvin Ailey dance troupe

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said. "Now I always hear from my colleagues, who I call their aunts and uncles, 'you know, Constance, he's going to be the dancer—he's going to end up dancing for this company.' I'm always like, 'really?' but I kind of wouldn't be sur-

prised now, because his ability is crazy. I'm just like, 'where did you get these feet, and this gorgeous flexibility? I don't think you even know what you have or how to use it yet.'"

Wherever life leads her children, they'll have

mom's support.

"If both of my children decide to become dancers, I'm all for it, and if they decide to become the veterinarian and the scientist that they say they want to be, I am all for that too," Stamatiou said.