

#SocialDisDancing: A Look at Ailey Standout Jessica Amber Pinkett's At-Home Dance Life

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From the most famous choreographers to the newest of dance newbies, we're all going through the same pandemic-related struggles right now. So, how are the pros coping with it all? To find out, we're doing an interview series, #SocialDisDancing, in which we catch up with some of your favorite dancers to see how they're step-ball-changing their way through this unprecedented moment in dance history. This week, we chatted with Jessica Amber Pinkett, dancer with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

(Be sure to check out Jessica's takeover of our Instagram today for an inside peek at her day in the #SocialDisDancing life.)

Where are you right now?

I'm currently quarantined with my cat, Wilson! And we're in my apartment in the Bronx, NYC.

What were you up to right before social distancing was advised?

I was on Ailey's U.S. tour. We flew to Texas because we had a performance there, and were all just a bit confused as to what was happening. We were in the airport, seeing the news, and witnessing everything starting to shut down. The day after we flew into Houston, all of us ended up flying back home. Our next city was going to be L.A., where we usually spend a whole week performing. We would've finished out our last set of performances last week, actually.

What have you been up to at home?

The first couple of days, I was happy to give my body some rest after being on tour. I spent a week not doing much of anything besides resting and unpacking. After that though, I didn't know what to do with myself. I was trying to find classes online and new ways to exercise, and ended up buying a stationary bike for my apartment.

Now, my routine depends on the day! There are some days that are planned out from the moment I wake up to the moment I go to sleep. But generally, I wake up and say hello to my cat first. I always start my day with gratitude, prayer, and quiet time. Those things help me be very intentional in how I'm going to go about the rest of my day. There's also always coffee involved in the morning, and I've been getting into smoothies too. After that, I'll either take class with Ailey, work out, or just go on YouTube and see if I can find any classes I like. Then, sometimes I'll comb through emails, do some journaling or reading, play with my cat (he's a ball full of energy), and talk to my family. I've been really proactive about keeping my relationships strong during this.

What's been hard for you about social distancing?

To not have hugged anyone in so long breaks my heart. It was a bit draining and disheartening at first. But the saving grace is that you're absolutely able to build and grow during these trying times. I've been getting stronger physically, mentally, emotionally, and especially spiritually, in my faith.

Living in NYC and dancing with Ailey, I'm away from my family pretty often, but having this break and not being able to go home definitely took a toll on me. There were a couple of days that were especially hard, but ultimately, it really makes me appreciate how close-knit a family we are.

To be still is to be seen. I never fully understood that. But right now, we're all being called to slow down and face the things that we often run from or deal with later. Sorting out all our feelings and situations that we've gone through and put on the back burner. With an abundance of time and no distractions, we have an opportunity to dive in deep and fully get in touch with ourselves.

Have you picked up any new hobbies?

I've become really focused on home decor. I've never been in my apartment longer than two months at a time, because I'm always touring with Ailey. But now, I've rearranged my entire apartment, created new art for my walls, and made my space what I always dreamt of it being, but never had the opportunity to do.

I've been trying to go out on walks. There's a park not too far away from me, and if you walk the perimeter it's a great workout. It's beautiful and green, and I've loved watching it bloom. I go out on my fire escape or up to my roof a lot. You can see all the buildings in Manhattan from there, and it's also very quiet and calm, which isn't most people's experience of NYC.

Have you been taking any virtual classes?

I take Ailey's classes frequently. Also, my friend and former Ailey dancer Fana Tesfagiorgis has been hosting a kind of virtual intensive, with mostly Horton and modern. Her classes are amazing, and she has a great sense of humor that I love.

What have you been bingeing?

There was definitely some bingeing happening when Netflix released the new season of "Nailed It." It features amateur bakers that are supposed to create these beautiful baking masterpieces normally done by professionals. Nine times out of ten, or dare I say 10/10, they don't look anything like they're supposed to. It's been hilarious and informative, since I love baking as well.

How do you think the dance world will change after this experience?

Things are slowly starting to open back up around the country. But it's easy to put desks six feet apart, or to work from different offices. For us dancers, it's virtually impossible to do that. Dance is very hands-on and physical. We can definitely make sure that everyone, including our audience, is as spaced out as possible and wears masks and gloves. But it's hard to think about how we, as professional dancers in a studio setting, are going to really be able to be all-in again, and stay involved in the creative process that normally requires us to be very close.

As a whole, though, I think the world really sees how important art is now. We as dancers know companies like Dance Theatre of Harlem, Ailey, the Graham company, but now the rest of the world does as well, and they see how necessary they are, and how much healing, growth, power and compassion is involved in this art form. I think seeing dance performances onscreen will motivate new audience members to come and see them live once we're up and running again.

How has your own dancing changed?

I've always been pretty hard on myself. At the beginning of this, I had all these expectations of how much I was going to accomplish. But there were some days where I didn't even feel like getting out of bed. I was in a dark place and not motivated at all, which really affected my confidence. But once I saw all the wonderful things that people were doing on social media, the classes they were taking and teaching, the works they were creating, I realized there's so much that I can do right now. Between that and turning to my faith, I started to get fueled up again.

Recently, my passion project has been combining my love of film and videography with dance. It's helped me open up and be vulnerable about sharing my experience of dancing through quarantine. I've done two videos so far, one called "You're Too Precious", to James Blake's new song, and one called "Endure." Pairing different arts with dance has helped strengthen me as a dancer, and helped me to look at dance through different lenses (no pun intended.)

Who's the first person you want to see after social distancing?

My mom! My mother is my best friend. I talk to her every day, and I can't wait to finally see her.

First place you want to go?

The Chesapeake Bay in Baltimore, MD, my hometown. And in NYC, I would love to go to the New York Botanical Gardens.

Any last words of advice for your fellow dancers?

Be calm. Allow yourself to feel what you feel, acknowledge where you are, and understand that what you're experiencing is valid, and that you're not alone. Don't get consumed by the dark places your mind sometimes goes to. It's important to always turn towards the light, and look for all the beauty, even in this time of uncertainty. Now's the time to find focus and clarity, to explore new things, and dive deeper into yourself.