

Alvin Ailey's Spirited Belen Pereyra

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By Cris Franco

The charming Belen Pereyra graces the world's stages as a proud company member of the renown eclectic Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, where this *dominicana* brings her spirited passion to the modern dance. I chatted with the bright young star who was in New York preparing for the upcoming tour.



Cris Franco: Alvin Ailey is such a vibrant yet revered institution. What's it like being in the company?

Belen Pereyra: It's a dream come true! It's exciting to grow as an artist within the company while at the same time seeing the world as we touch thousands of viewers' lives. It's the perfect company for me because we're allowed to do lots of different styles of choreography.

CF: Yes, founded in 1958, Ailey infused all cultures (and races) into his work and professional organization. What's your background?

BP: My family's all from the Dominican Republic. Both my parents were engineers who had their degrees but had to start from scratch when they immigrated here to create a better life for their kids. Dad had excellent rhythm but it was my mother who was passionate about the arts. Seeing something within me she pushed me hard to pursue my career. She's my biggest fan. I get my strength from her.

CF: And you've needed that strength since your career has taken many unforeseen twists and turns, right?

BP: I had a tough time because I arrived in the U.S. from the Dominican Republic at age 4. I graduated as valedictorian from Boston Art Academy with a full scholarship but discovered I wasn't eligible for financial aid because I wasn't a citizen – which also prevented me from working. So I couldn't afford to go to college. Then I sprained my ankle. So I lost a lot of technique. I couldn't move for months and the beans and rice at home were so good. Well, the combination of inactivity and diet wasn't right.

CF: How did you get back into dance?

BP: I took free classes at Boston Art Academy that got me back into shape. I mentored with Earl Mosley and then danced with Camille A. Brown which got me back to New York where I earned free dance classes working for the Alvin Ailey extension program (it's like work study) never thinking I'd be good enough to be in the company itself.

I worked intensively for one year to get into the Alvin Ailey company. I had to hustle and work hard, but I knew that dance was the only thing I really wanted to do. Overall, I'm happy things went the way they did because now I really appreciate this job. I'm in my second season and look forward to dancing in my upcoming third.

CF: What's fueling the dance world's "Latino invasion"?

BP: In my case, dance is in my blood ever since I was a kid back in Lawrence, Massachusetts performing in the yearly "*Semana Hispana*." My background helps me with rhythms and having listened to Latin music all my life makes it easier to dance African. *Palos* and *bomba* leads you into African dance, which leads you into hip-hop.

CF: How is *la cultura* effecting contemporary dance?

BP: I see lots of Latin influences in Ronald K. Brown's work. He's a tremendous choreographer and we're now performing his GRACE, which feels very Afro-Cuba. When I perform it I feel like doing a *merengue*.



CF: What's the best part of being a professional dancer?

BP: Dance is a universal language so it really gives me joy to work extremely hard every day. I'm grateful that I have the urge to grow so that when the moment comes on stage that the spirit within me can just – shine! People pay good money to see a good performance and if we can inspire them, if our spirits can connect even for just a moment, that's the best part.

CF: What advice do you have for parents with children who want to dance?

BP: It's extremely important to send kids to the right school. It's sad to see a child who's been dancing for 10 years without sufficient technique. It's scary that anyone can open a dance studio and charge money to teach children. Ballet barre is essential. So if the school doesn't have a ballet barre you really can't fully train your instrument. But if a kid's just doing it for fun, it's a great activity that teaches you how to focus, concentration and discipline.

CF: What can we expect in your upcoming Los Angeles concerts?

BP: We're doing *Petite Mort*, *From Before*, *Another Night* and, of course, our Ailey masterpieces like *Revelations*. It's our signature piece – I believe it's the most performed modern dance of the past century. *Minus 16* is fun and *Home* is hip-hop. That's why I love this company, audiences never leave unsatisfied.

CF: Then you're off to Latin America, right?

BP: We're going to Brazil and Argentina! We get to do mini-concerts for kids. It's amazing to see an auditorium full of kids and witness the enthusiastic response from young people of all backgrounds – it makes me feel like we're really touching their lives. Dance is about spirit and I'm very happy and blessed that it's my job to send our audiences into a place where seeing our work fills their spirits, too.

CF: Thank you, Belen!

You can catch the very spirited Belen Pereyra in Glorja Kaufman presents Dance at the Music Center: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater; (Wednesday) April 17 thru (Sunday) April 21; tickets \$28 and up; all show info: <http://www.musiccenter.org/about/Our-Programs/Glorja-Kaufman-Dance/1213-Season/Alvin-Ailey-American-Dance-Theater/>