

Lawrence woman performs with Alvin Ailey

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By Yadira Betances

LAWRENCE — Belen Pereyra has come a long way from the darling 7-year-old dancing up a storm on the stages at Campagnone Common and local social clubs. At 25, she is now performing with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater on stages throughout the United States and around in the world in such places as China, Israel, Norway, Germany and France.

“I feel extremely privileged, honored and humble to be part of this group,” Pereyra said during a telephone interview from New York.

Pereyra will be in Boston this weekend when the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater comes to the Citi Wang Center. This is her second performance in Boston since joining the company in 2011.

“It felt really good to be there,” Pereyra said of last year’s appearance. She recalls attending ballets at the Wang Center with members of the Lawrence Ballet Academy. “I couldn’t believe I was there and I was the dancer. It was overwhelming.”

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is a world-renowned company that began in New York in 1958 by Ailey and a group of African-American modern dancers. Ailey, who died in 1989 was a choreographer and activist known for revolutionizing African-American and modern dance.

Pereyra auditioned to become a member of the dance troupe. “Sometimes I have to pinch myself to see if I’m really here because you’re with one of the top dance companies in the world,” she said.

When she is not in one of the company’s performances, Pereyra said she likes to sit and watch along with the audience.

“Sitting in the audience really touches and moves you because you feel the energy, see people smile as they clap and even dance in their seats,” she said.

When she is on stage, she wants to be a role model for children watching.

“A lot of them look up to us and we’re able to guide them. When we perform, they can learn how to be a better dancer just by watching us and I take pride in that,” Pereyra said.

Born in the Dominican Republic, Pereyra moved to Lawrence at the age of 4 with her mother Belen Tournas and siblings, Katherine, Pedro and Federico. She attended the Leonard School in Lawrence.

“I’m grateful to have lived in Lawrence and it’s still a part of my heart. The city made me a fighter,” she said.

For high school, she commuted to Boston Arts Academy, where she graduated as valedictorian and received the Dance Award and the Mayor’s Award for Academic Excellence. After graduating from high school, Pereyra sprained her ankle. She studied one semester at Pine Manor College, but was not happy because she missed dancing.



“It was the scariest decision I’ve made leaving college,” she said. Pereyra went back to Boston Arts to hone her techniques.

“It was hard on my ego and it really crashed me, especially after being class valedictorian,” she said. “This was the lowest of lowest points I’ve ever been in my life, but I’m very happy I never gave up. What gave me the strength was knowing there was nothing else I wanted to do.”



She moved to New York in 2009 and was mentored by Earl Mosley. She danced with Camille A. Brown & Dancers for three years, performing at The Joyce Theater, Jacob's Pillow and the Dancers Responding to AIDS' annual events, Dance from the Heart, and The Fire Island Dance Festival. Pereyra helped Matthew Rushing with his ballet "Uptown" for the Ailey company in 2009, and got a work study at Alvin Ailey in order to get free dance classes. She worked there for three years, signing people in and checking attendance in the classrooms.



"I knew if I wanted to become a professional, I had to get into shape, work on my body and techniques," she said.

Pereyra learned her dance fundamentals in Lawrence, first with Leonor Sanchez of the United Peruvian Association and later with Quity Morgan of the Lawrence Ballet Academy, where she trained in everything from classical ballet, jazz, tap, hip hop and lyrical. Both Sanchez and Morgan are not surprised Pereyra has attained her goal of making it to the top in the dance world.

"I'm very proud of her," said Morgan, a teacher in the Performing and Fine Arts High School on the Lawrence High campus. "Talent is not everything in life. She is where she is because of her effort and hard work."

Pereyra was in elementary school when she joined the former Lawrence Ballet Academy, owned by Morgan.

"She was always determined and able to overcome all obstacles to achieve her goals," Morgan said.

Sanchez, a retired Lawrence teacher, agrees. "I saw the talent in her from the beginning. She was a natural, full of confidence and poise, and did it all with charisma. She had a special gift for dancing any type of music," Sanchez said.

Pereyra performed during the Hispanic Week Festival that takes place in June in Lawrence both with the Peruvian Association and Lawrence Ballet Academy.

"Hispanic Week brings back the fondest memories ever," Pereyra said. "They are the best childhood memories because that's was the beginning of my dancing career. It was part of my growing up and one of the reasons of who I am today."

She said her background of Latin music has helped her at Alvin Ailey. With Lawrence Ballet Academy, she danced Palo, a Dominican sacred music that uses a hollow drum and voice and the merengue, the national dance of the Dominican Republic played on a metal scraper, double-headed drum, trumpets and other instruments. She also performed the Puerto Rican "Bomba" to the sound of the drums as part of a circle of dancers where female dancers would raise their skirts with every movement. As a member of the Peruvian Association, Pereyra danced the "Marinera," a traditional Peruvian dance where couples dance using handkerchiefs as props.

"Those rhythms have absolutely helped me with African dances," she said.

Pereyra credits her mother, Belen Tournas, for her love of dancing. "I'm her number one fan," said Tournas, a science teacher in the Humanities and Leadership Development High School on the Lawrence High School campus. "When she's on stage, she is transformed and lives through her dance."

Tournas recalls after her daughter returned from school in Boston, she would go to the ballet studio until late. She would then stay up until 2 or 3 a.m. doing homework, and do it all over again the next day.



"It was her dream to become a dancer and she was always determined until she accomplished it," Tournas said.

If you go :What: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater featuring the Boston premiere of "Another Night," choreographed by Kyle Abraham, as well as works by Alvin Ailey, Jiří Kylián, Ronald K. Brown and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Artistic Director Robert Battle. When: May 16, 7:30 p.m.; May 17, 8 p.m.; May 18, 2 and 8 p.m.; and May 19, 3 p.m. Where: Citi Performing Arts Center - Wang Theatre Tickets: Price start at \$30, and are available online at www.celebrityseries.org or by calling 1-866-348-9738.