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Belen Pereyra and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Costa Mesa How things not working out... worked out better in the end

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By Alejandra Enciso Guzmán

It has been an intense week full of choreography and dance at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts (SCFTA) in Costa Mesa. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has filled the cultural campus with never before performed works on the West Coast. A lot of us don't get to go to New York. When these types of events come to the area, just a brief drive away, they are certainly a must see.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is recognized by U.S. Congressional resolution as a vital American "Cultural Ambassador to the World." It has performed for an estimated 23 million people in 71 countries on six continents, promoting the uniqueness of the African-American cultural experience and the preservation and enrichment of the American modern dance tradition.



It grew from a now-fabled March 1958 performance in New York that changed forever the perception of American dance. Founded by Alvin Ailey, and guided by Judith Jamison beginning in 1989, the Company is now led by Robert Battle, whom Judith Jamison chose to succeed her on July 1, 2011.

San Diego Free Press had a chance to chat with company dancer, Belen Pereyra, who was invited to join the Company by Robert Battle during his first season as Artistic Director in 2011. Belen has received notice for her standout performances in Ronald K. Brown's *Four Corners and Grace*, *Petite Mort* by Jirí Kylián, in addition to Alvin Ailey's signature American masterpiece *Revelations* which will have a performance at SCFTA on Saturday, March 29th.

"Every audience no matter what walk of life, will enjoy these performances. It is a human experience. Ailey speaks to regular people no matter what your background is, that is what makes us so special" explained the dancer featured in *Dance Magazine* as "Ailey's petite force." Pereyra, of Dominican descent, overcame certain challenges because of her dedication to dance. Her passion took her as far as becoming valedictorian in her graduation from the Boston Arts Academy.

"I would say the darkest time for me was after high school. I always felt that if I worked hard in high school, that life would hand me exactly what I wanted which was going to college for dance, full ride and then get into a company. But it did not work that way." Although Belen obtained a scholarship, it was not enough to pay for the school that she wanted to learn and grow in.

In addition, she sustained an injury. "I sprained my ankle in a summer intensive at Florida, I had nowhere to go so I was staying with my aunt who was a great cook! I was eating a lot of rice and beans. Not only did I gain weight, I felt I lost the technique and the confidence..." She studied for a semester in a local college but she felt she was not in the right place.

So Pereyra dropped out and moved in with her dance teacher from high school, Sheryl Thomas and her two daughters. "I just knew I needed to dance, that is why I dropped out. Mrs. Thomas would still go to my high school and teach, so every morning I went with her for the year and a half that I lived with her and, three years

after I moved out, I went to Boston Arts Academy, my high school, and took both level classes, with freshman's and sophomores and juniors and seniors."

Belen was humbled by that experience. She auditioned for colleges again, with not so positive results. "There was no end to the suffering, nothing was coming my way," she added. The professional judgment was that she did not have the right weight and that she had lost technique. "It was tough."

She relocated to New York and worked at Alvin Ailey for three years, signing and checking attendance for students BUT every four hours of work entitled her to free classes. "I pretty much accumulated hours to take classes with the students. I would take a class every day." She also had side jobs. One day, she thought to actually audition for the company.

"I did not think it was possible or that I could do it. I was afraid of taking classes with students in level four! Let alone being in the same company! It was mind blowing. But, I challenged myself for a year. I took classes every single day and when the audition came, I got in that day." Ever since, Belen has been traveling the world thanks to her craft and sticking to it. Places like Norway, Germany, Brazil, all around the United States, Paris and still going.

For the aspiring professional dancers out there, Belen's advice is to really understand your tools and your equipment, which is your body. "I think there are a lot of misconceptions out there in the dance world on how a dancer should move and I think it is based on one particular look which is the super turnout hyper extended individual which we are not at all" she added. She also feels strongly about the corrections that are made. "Make sure those cater to your body. If it does not feel right, then it is probably not meant to be for your type. Be patient and kind with the process. There is no quick fix to what you want... you need to put in the work" the 26 year old concluded.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will be performing until Sunday March 30th. Tickets start at \$25 dollars.

For more information on ticket prices and times please visit: SCFTA.org or by phone (714) 556-2787