

By: Robyn Grant-Moran

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Canadian dancer looks to inspire the next generation

Ontarian Hannah Alissa Richardson returns to Toronto with the theatre that made her feel seen as a racialized performer

ROBYN GRANT-MORAN

Hannah Alissa Richardson first saw the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at Toronto's Meridian Hall at 12 years old, 12 years ago. Dancing since age three, and already active in the competitive circuit, Richardson had never seen so many BIPOC dancers on stage at once. Born to Trinidadian and Filipino parents and growing up in Vaughan, Ont., Richardson says prior to that night, "I was used to being the only person of colour on stage, I thought that was just normal."

When Alvin Ailey returns to Toronto's Meridian Hall this February, Richardson won't be there in the audience — she'll be on stage as the sole Canadian in her inaugural season with the company.

Alvin Ailey (1931-1989) created his eponymous company in 1958 to preserve and celebrate African-American dance and culture. Since its genesis, the New York-based company has enriched and expanded the definitions of modern American dance as a whole, inspiring and eventually training generations of dancers with the establishment of what is now the Ailey School.

Seeing works by Ailey and the best contemporary African-American choreographers and dancers in the company was nothing short of life changing for the young Richardson. On a phone call from New York between costume fittings and rehearsals, she chokes up as she relives the joy she experienced seeing the company on stage, and the pride in now being one of it dancers, perhaps inspiring the next generation.

Not long after that fateful night, Richardson auditioned for



Hannah Alissa Richardson, seen performing in Francesca Harper's *Freedom Series*, has been dancing since she was three years old. She will be the sole Canadian performer in her inaugural season with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater when it visits Toronto in early February. ERIN BAIANO

a summer intensive program at the Ailey School. She was accepted, though her competition schedule would not permit her to attend until she was 14. "It was my first time really leaving Canada and travelling," says Richardson, recounting that month in New York, where she now spends plenty of time. "My parents traded weekends to come stay with me."

After finishing high school, Richardson joined the prestigious full-time program at the Ailey School, graduating with honours in 2019. Richardson then danced with Ailey II, the bridging program for dancers between school and a company position.

It was there where rehearsal director Ronni Favors gave Richard-

son and classmates a powerful bit of advice: "Be a sponge" when it comes to learning. "Absorb all the information."

Richardson continues, "Not only from the people in the front of the room but from your co-workers, peers that you're dancing beside. Absorb information from outside of the elite; from students' shows, plays and commercials, because there's always something to learn. Grab a little something from everybody and put it in your toolbox to use for the future." It's a teaching that Richardson still abides by, committed to continuously learning and improving.

The current show's Saturday evening bill includes Ailey and

Mary Barnett's *Survivors*, a tribute to Nelson and Winnie Mandela, Ailey's seminal work *Revelations* and MacArthur Fellow Kyle Abraham's *Are You in Your Feelings?* Richardson describes Abraham's 32-minute work as a mixtape that elevates and celebrates, featuring the music of Kendrick Lamar, Erykah Badu, Maxwell and Drake to name a few. The pairing of contemporary dance with modern-day R&B, hip-hop and soul music is what makes this piece so exciting for Richardson. "Just seeing the two go hand in hand, it's really beautiful, really fun and really entertaining to watch."

This full circle moment in Richardson's career comes in part thanks to the "village" that sup-

ported her: her parents, brothers, friends, boyfriend. "You can do it by yourself, but what's the point of being successful with no one to share it with?"

Richardson's final words of advice to aspiring dancers in the audience where she was 12 years ago: Just because the professionals make it look effortless, it isn't. "Not everything's going to be easy, the challenges are great ... to get to where you want to be, you've got to fall in love with hard work, and don't give up."

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The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is returning to Toronto's Meridian Hall Feb. 3 and 4.