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Maggy van den Heuvel is the first Dutch dancer in the New York company Ailey II: 'You learn to build on yourself'

By: Charissa Promes

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This month Ailey II will perform in Rotterdam, at the Holland Dance Festival. Almost all members of the company (named after choreographer Alvin Ailey) are of color. From the moment Van den Heuvel saw these dancers on YouTube, she wanted to be part of them.

She has just returned from New York and looks pensively out over the water at a café in Houten. This is where dancer Maggy van den Heuvel (27) grew up, and where she took her first steps in the dance world, at a local dance school. Through that school, she landed the role of little Nala in the musical *The Lion King* as an 8-year-old. Later, she followed

the four-year dance course Lucia Marthas, and at the age of 22, Van den Heuvel left the Netherlands to pursue an international dance career with the renowned dance company Ailey II in New York.

This month, the company will perform for the first time in Dutch theatres, during the 19th edition of the Holland Dance Festival. Van den Heuvel is the first Dutch person to dance in it.

In addition to the prestigious Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the legacy of renowned choreographer Alvin Ailey (1931-1989), Ailey II was founded in 1974, a place for a younger generation of professional dancers. The group brings a unique mix of ballet, modern, jazz, and West African dance to the stage.

In addition to this special mix of dance styles, the twelve-member group is distinctive in another respect: with the exception of one dancer, all members are of color. This is no exception in the United States, but it is unique in many other countries, including the Netherlands. Moreover, you rarely see modern or classically trained professional dancers with a non-Western background on large stages, with the exception of a few, such as ballerina Michaela DePrince. She has since exchanged the Netherlands for the US.

Everything for the Ailey School 'I remember when I first saw Ailey II on YouTube,' says Van den Heuvel. 'I saw dancers who looked exactly like me, with the same build and strength, but they still moved very fluidly. From then on, all my attention was focused on the Ailey School.' This school, affiliated with the Ailey companies, takes on hundreds of international students each year, for summer courses to four-year bachelor's programs. With an intensive dance schedule, the school prepares young talents for professional dance life. Of those, a handful are invited to audition for Ailey II each year.



Once in New York, the Surinamese-Dutch Van den Heuvel got the chance to pose in an advertisement for Nike. Suddenly, she was on a billboard in Times Square. She danced along to a show by superstar Teyana Taylor. When her New York room became too small during the lockdown in 2020, she looked for space on the roof of her apartment building. She taught herself the choreographies from well-known music videos, such as those of Janet Jackson's *Rhythm Nation*, and turned them into widely viewed videos. Jackson herself shared Van den Heuvel's video on her own Instagram account. That video has now been viewed more than 230 thousand times.

Called out of the blue during her senior year at Ailey School, her big opportunity came. "Out of the blue, I got a call from the director asking if I wanted to dance for Ailey II. I said, when do we start? Apparently, the hard work at school had been noticed. But that required sacrifices.' Due to the closed borders during the pandemic, Van den Heuvel missed birthdays, births and the support of family and friends in the Netherlands. 'You learn to rely on yourself, but if I don't feel like cooking, I can't just get a bowl of noodles from my mother.'

Alvin Ailey may be a world-famous name in dance now, but he himself grew up under harsh circumstances. In the small town of Rogers, Texas, he grew up during one of the biggest economic crises of the last century. As the child of a teenage mother, he moved frequently and had to deal with racism, poverty, and homophobia. He made his ballets on the basis of these 'blood memories', as he called them himself.



Black joy and black pain 'People recognize themselves mainly in his piece *Revelations*', says Van den Heuvel. This choreography by Ailey will also be performed during Holland Dance Festival. 'Spectators recognize the black joy and the black pain. When I dance *Revelations*, I experience an almost spiritual feeling. The music has something ecclesiastical about it, and spiritual rituals are performed in the dance. As a dancer, you can't convey that without going to a kind of otherworldly feeling yourself. If you open yourself up to that spirituality, it is beneficial for both the audience and the dancers.'

In 1989, Ailey died of AIDS. He asked his doctor to conceal his illness. Ailey was not openly gay and wanted to protect his mother from the prejudices that HIV and AIDS bring. Even after his death, Ailey still enjoys great prestige and his choreographies are respectfully preserved. Van den Heuvel: 'On the other hand, we are also looking at how we can make his pieces better; more in keeping with the times. Thanks to modern techniques and new information, dancers can now do more with their bodies, and that can be seen in the new generations.'

Ailey II at Holland Dance Festival, at various locations in Rotterdam, 23/1 to 28/1.