

The Legacy of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

By: Chad Young

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EXCLUSIVE
INTERVIEW

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PRINCIPAL DANCER CONSTANCE STAMATIOU TALKS ABOUT THE HUMAN SPIRIT BEHIND THE WORK.



Stamatiou with her children, Thanos and Savannah. Both kids are learning dance at the Ailey School in New York. Photo credit: Eric Politzer.

Feature photo by Andrew Eccles.

My first introduction to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AADT) nearly a decade ago was an experience I'll never forget. Even though I knew the rich history of the company and Ailey dating back to 1958, but that knowledge didn't fully prepare me for the powerful impact of the live AADT performance. Let's just say it was an immense spiritual journey that billowed from the dancers onstage to the audience in TPAC's Jackson Hall.

"Mr. Ailey always said that since dance came from people, it should be given back to people, and we are keeping that vision of his alive to this day," says AADT Principal Dancer Constance Stamatiou.

The Charlotte, North Carolina, native is eager to return to Music City.

"The last time we were in Nashville was in 2018, and I can't wait to come back. I had a great time chowing down on some great food in your city!"

Stamatiou's foray into the dance world began when she was 5 years old. Her mom worked next door to a dance studio, and it was love at first sight, she says. She eventually earned a scholarship with North Carolina Dance Theatre (now the Charlotte Ballet), then made her way to New York to attend SUNY Purchase's dance program. After a

year there, she discovered the Ailey school and made the transfer.

"When I got there, I was blown away! All of the different techniques they offer and all of the students from all over the world. It was such a great feeling. Everyone was just so passionate and dancing hard," says Stamatiou.

She wound up becoming a scholarship student in a fellowship program for two years, then joined Ailey II, then two years later got a contract with the main company under the direction of the legendary Judith Jamison.

The dancer speaks with warmth when referring to Ailey's works. She calls them masterpieces, and if you have had the chance to see them performed, you will agree wholeheartedly with that description.

"I think the reason why Ailey's work touches so many people is because of how his masterpieces come from touchstones of his life," says Stamatiou. "He grew up in the South, and he was choreographing from his memories going to a Baptist church, seeing the hardships and trials of those in his community — which is the beginning of *Revelations* ... 'I've Been Boked' — but not being defeated, and in the end, they're rejoicing. I think that's what really touches people," she adds.

Stamatiou is also a mom of two to Savannah, 8, and Thanos, 5. Both kids are learning dance in the Ailey School, and they also have their sights set on future careers.

"At this moment, he wants to be a scientist and bring back the dinosaurs, and she wants to be a veterinarian. Whatever their hearts desire!" she says.

Stamatiou says motherhood has made her a better dancer and being a dancer makes her a better mom even though it's a lot to juggle.

"Being able to use the passion in the pain has been therapeutic for me, and that makes me a more mature dancer as well," she says.

One of her favorite Ailey pieces to perform is *Cry*, the work he created as a gift to his mother. She hopes kids in the audience will walk away inspired.

"I hope kids take away a passion and respect for dance and any art form while leaving with a heart full of hope," she says.

IF YOU GO:

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater
Feb. 28 - 29; All ages
TPAC's Jackson Hall
505 Deaderick St., Nashville
615-782-4040 | tpac.org
Showtimes: 8 p.m.
Tickets: \$40 - \$90