

Courtney Celeste Spears keeping company with legends

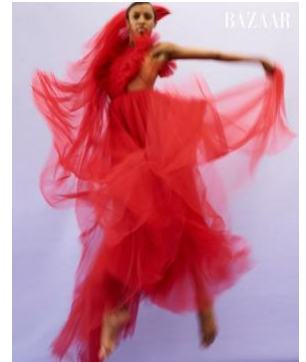
By: Shavaughn Moss

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Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater dancer featured in Harper's Bazaar's August issue as dance returns to the stage

Courtney Celeste Spears is keeping company with legends. She was selected by her company Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and among a number of dance legends photographed for Harper's Bazaar's August issue.

Spears was part of an elite group of dancers that included Savion Glover, American tap dancer, actor, and choreographer; Misty Copeland, who in 2015 became the first African American woman to be promoted to principal dancer at the American Ballet Theatre; Xin Ying, principal, Martha Graham Dance Company; Stella Abrera, a former American Ballet Theatre principal; Lloyd Knight, principal dancer Martha Graham Dance Company; Tatian Desardouin, Passion Fruit Dance Company; Melissa Verdecia, Ballet Hispanico; Tiler Peck, New York City Ballet; Calvin Royal III; American Ballet Theatre; and Vinson Fraley, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company among other dancers who showcased fashion while highlighting their individual expressions of movement for the story "Dance Is Finally Back" by Siobhan Burke, which speaks to dancers being back on stage performing in front of live audiences after a year of solo practices and virtual performances. And for some of the field's biggest stars, choreographing the future of an art steeped in tradition means leaving some things in the past.



"I received an email from our [public relations] director at Alvin Ailey, Christopher Zunner, who let me know that Harper's Bazaar was putting together a portfolio of dancers for their August issue and had invited me to be photographed. I just about screamed!" Spears recalled.

"When I got there, Savion Glover was filming his video component. Savion Glover is a legend in his own right, trailblazing through the dance industry with his tapping feet. I was a little star struck. I walked in and saw a rack of top designer clothes, a full makeup and hair station, the entire crew, and a call board of some of the most iconic dancers currently in our industry like Misty Copeland, Xin Ying, Stella Abrera, Sascha Radetsky, Lloyd Knight and Vinson Fraley ... and then I looked and saw a photo of me."

Spears was awed. "I couldn't believe the company I was in. I still don't know how I got in that room, but God is amazing."

For the shoot, Spears who is resplendent in a red FY21 Dior Heart dress was styled by Samira Nasr, Harper's Bazaar's first woman of color to be appointed editor-in-chief and photographed by Amy Troost.

The idea was for Spears' photo to jump off the page, so she says she just started moving and jumping and trying things with the skirt of the dress.

"It's easy to get in your head about getting the perfect photo, so I just tried to let go and trust myself. Once I started doing that, we got the shot. It was a surreal moment."

When she got her copy of the magazine, Spears says seeing herself on a full page made her think of her family who let her pursue her dream of dance.

"I thought of my grandfather, the late Franklin Sweeting, and my grandmother Andrea Sweeting [Sister Sister (Breast) Cancer Support Group president], and my mother D'Andrea Sweeting Cary. I thought of how proud my grandfather must be looking down on his 'Miss Courts' still trying to soar in the Big Apple. He'd be the first one who wanted a copy [of the magazine]. My Grammy continues to be my inspiration, and I couldn't wait to tell her. And my mom, is my biggest advocate. She grew up in The Bahamas and let me pursue my dreams, even if she wasn't sure of here it would take me – and now look. This moment was for them."

Spears is now in rehearsals for lot of pieces to be performed throughout the year, and preparing for her Company's return to the stage and a December 1-19 season in the heart of New York City with a live audience.

"I think I'm going to be an emotional wreck when that curtain goes up, but I'm thrilled to be back on stage," she says.

They will also take to the road again with stops in Miami, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles, California. Still in the midst of COVID-19, Spears says even as they prepare to return to the stage, he says they are cognizant that everything is still subject to change with the pandemic.

The stage she says is where she says she feels most alive.

"I like to say the stage is where God and I have the best conversations, and I've missed it so much."

Spears was on tour with Ailey in Texas when they were sent home. She had someone living in her apartment at the time, and made the decision to go to her parents' house in Florida for "two weeks" in her head. She ended up being there for four months before returning to New York.

"I've never had that much time off since I was a kid. I've trained consistently for as long as I can remember."

With no choice about taking the time off, Spears says she went through a rough phase of not being motivated to dance.

"I started out pretty strong, but then ended up stopping altogether. I think I was in shock or grieving. My entire world has shut down and I needed time to process. And then I remember getting up and just starting day by day. I ended up streaming some of my classes on Instagram and had so many students join me for class. It actually comforted me a lot realizing I wasn't in this whole thing by myself."

While in Florida, Spears says she took advantage of the open air and landscape to ride her bike every morning which helped her to start to build up her cardio.

As she trains and prepares to return to the stage Spears says she is feeling like a revamped version of herself.

"I am not the same woman or dancer I was before the pandemic. I've grown so much – I've re-evaluated so much of my life looking at what I want long term and what my priorities are. I've cultivated some new dreams I didn't even know I had. This pandemic showed me there is no time to waste. Every day God gives us on this earth is a blessing, and it's not to be wasted. I'm just getting started and I'm blowing all the ceilings I set for myself in the past. All I have to do is keep doing the work, put everything in God's hands, walk in faith, and I know he will do the rest."