



Interview: Jessica Amber Pinkett of ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

By: Emily Berger

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Baltimore-native Jessica Amber Pinkett returned to the Kennedy Center this week for the annual performances of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. It's her fourth season with the company but her first after taking a few years away to study film and rekindle her love for dance.

I sat down with Jessica this week to talk about her return to the company, her starring role in Hope Boykin's *Finding Free*, one of the new works of the 2024-2025 season, and get her advice on dancing with confidence.

Hi, Jessica – thank you for taking the time to speak with me. How does it feel to be back with the company after a few years away?

It still feels new. When I was in the company the first time around, I didn't feel like I found my artistic voice or my footing in the space. As an artist, our main goal is to share and to be vulnerable with ourselves and others. I did great dancing and was supported by colleagues and the artistic team but I wasn't as happy as I thought I'd be. This is the company I dreamed of being in since I was a little girl.

Something needed to change and that was learning about myself. Once I had that time to discover and explore and I could grow up, so to speak, I could come back to Ailey with a clearer idea of who I wanted to be in this space and how to navigate it. It's not about being like someone else; it's about me showing up as me and allowing myself to be showcased on the stage.

[Jessica laughs] I feel much bolder, more intentional and a lot happier.

That's great to hear and I look forward to seeing that transformation in your dancing. You're from the Baltimore area. How does it feel to be dancing closer to home?

Oh, it feels amazing to be dancing here. It's been a while since I've been able to expand and extend myself as I am now with Ailey. I did some work as a guest artist and now I have more to share and to say. Plus I have so many friends and family who can come to the performances when they're this close to home.

What works are you most excited to be dancing in this year?

I'm most excited to be in [Ronald K. Brown's] *Grace* and *Finding Free*, but I find excitement too in *Revelations*. We do it almost every night and you can get caught up and find it dull. But when I step back and remember that I get to make a different choice and can try something new, I find something new in it that keeps me going.

DC audiences will see you in *Finding Free* on Thursday. What does that piece represent to you?

To me, it's about how even though there is so much weight and heaviness in our lives, how do you find yourself and move through that and exist in the beauty of it? The hard parts of life are precisely what help us to grow; can we find

some freedom in it? Where is the time and space to be bigger and bolder than experiences that may be not so great? That's a choice and it's on each of us.

Any favorite things to do when you're in the DMV?

Nine out of ten times if I'm coming home, I'm eating crabs or at least crab cakes. When I'm home I'm mostly spending time with family and friends in the area and, if I'm performing, mentally preparing myself for what's to come. Sometimes it's overwhelming to have to represent my city and handle things with grace.

For those of us that don't feel as confident in our ability to handle things with grace, do you have any tips for how we can take up space and move with confidence?

Acknowledge that you don't feel confident – I think that's the first step. A lot of times we pretend but sometimes you have to say "I feel crazy and I am uncomfortable" and acknowledging that helps to reset yourself. Knowing that, you can move forward with sound decisions. I do a lot of writing to think through and process, and I talk to people. It's amazing how much we all share.

I see some of the best dancers in the world do amazing things onstage and then come offstage and doubt themselves. Push through and allow yourself to feel the discomfort and then find the ways to move through it. It's like a flower trying to blossom – you can get stuck but when you push in a new direction, you build confidence that help you move through.

Last question – is there anything that I didn't ask you about that you want to share with our readers?

I want everyone to have an amazing experience in the arts and to continue supporting the arts in general. Art really saves lives and is important to be seen, heard and shared. Baltimore is such a beautiful and vibrant place and I'm honored to be able to represent black and brown artists. I want all the young kids to see me and know that this could be a possibility for them too.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Kennedy Center performances run through Sunday, February 9. Visit [kennedy-center.org](https://www.kennedy-center.org) for tickets and more information.