

Authority Magazine

Power Women: Samantha Figgins of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater On How To Successfully Navigate Work, Love and Life As A Powerful Woman

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If ever you find yourself in a space where people are uneasy with your presence, shine brighter! Stand in the power of all that you are. And do NOT apologize for it.

How does a successful, strong, and powerful woman navigate work, employee relationships, love, and life in a world that still feels uncomfortable with strong women? In this interview series, called “Power Women” we are talking to accomplished women leaders who share their stories and experiences navigating work, love and life as a powerful woman.

As a part of this series, I had the distinct pleasure of interviewing Samantha Figgins.

Samantha Figgins is a Deaf/Hard of Hearing dancer, choreographer, and model from Washington, D.C. who began training at the Duke Ellington School of Arts and Dance Theatre of Harlem; before continuing her education at SUNY Purchase Conservatory of Dance, where she graduated cum laude. Figgins joined Complexions Contemporary Ballet in 2013 and was highlighted on the cover of Dance Spirit magazine and in Pointe Magazine’s “10 Careers to Watch.” She joined Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 2014 where she continues her career as a leading dancer; and made her choreographic debut for the company in 2025 with the world premiere of The Holy Blues created in collaboration with Jawole Jo Willa Zollar and Chalvar Monteiro.

Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dig in, our readers would like to get to know you a bit more. Can you tell us a bit about your childhood “backstory”?

I was born and raised in Washington, D.C. I was blessed to come into this world a twin, from such loving supporting parents and welcomed by two fierce older sisters. At 10 months old, I became partially deaf after a bout of spinal meningitis and from there navigated the ups and downs of being Hard of Hearing. I am so grateful to my mother and father who taught their children that any dream can become a reality and to go after those things with courage and faith. She enrolled me in ballet following my older sister’s success and dance became a refuge for me. I attended the historic Duke Ellington School of the Arts while also attending Dance Theater of Harlem residencies through The Kennedy Center. I was then off to New York for college at SUNY Purchase Conservatory of Dance, graduating cum laude. After college, I joined Complexions Contemporary Ballet and in 2014 joined Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. I am blessed to be in my 11th season with the company.

Can you tell us the story about what led you to this particular career path?

I have my mother to thank for guiding me to dance where I found a deep love and appreciation for the craft. It was especially required for my twin sister and I who were full of energy and curiosity. My mother said my twin and I were “spirited” children and needed a safe outlet for our energy. She saw what dance provided my older sister, who later became a soloist with Dance Theater of Harlem. Discipline, grace, physical coordination and confidence. At such a young age, seeing my older sister travel the world with dance as her vehicle showed me the possibilities of where dance and discipline could take me. What cemented this as my trajectory was how safe I felt in dance with my hearing loss. Being Hard of Hearing, body language and physical expression was in a way my first language. I am able to show up in dance with no confusion, doubt or fear. All those things were the jumping point for me to take this path forward with dance.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began your career?

One of the most interesting stories I can recall is actually from the start of my career. There was a blizzard in New York, and I was set to travel out to Europe the next day for tour. I got a call that Beyoncé needed dancers for a video she was creating for her Mrs. Carter World Tour. I was hired as one of the lead ballet dancers and was a ball of nerves,

excitement and gratitude. I learned my choreography and sat in hair and makeup for hours waiting for all the other dancers to get ready. During that time, I got to sit in a little corner, continue warming up my body and rehearsing, but got to watch Beyoncé at work. She was quiet, laser focused and knew exactly what she was looking to create. What I also saw was how she allowed others to lead. How she encouraged the other talent on set. Her quiet confidence made space for the other talent to shine brightly. When it was my time to come on set, Beyoncé was sitting on her throne with dancers all around her. I took off my warmups and was ready to go. Literally giving “Eye of the Tiger”. I remember hearing her say, “Oh, she looks fierce!” under her breath. We danced and filmed for hours into the night, and it was brilliant! Not just because it was Beyoncé, but because it was truly watching everyone’s expertise and genius shine. It was a beautiful ecosystem of brilliance and that is the standard of excellence that makes everything Beyoncé and her team does shine. It was a masterclass and I took all the notes.

You are a successful business leader. Which three character traits do you think were most instrumental to your success? Can you please share a story or example for each?

Yes! There are so many important qualities that one needs to be an effective leader. And it’s actually interesting how they all inform the other. For me, being a visionary is on the top of the list. But not just the ability to have the vision, but the ability to trust that you are the one meant to bring that vision to life. Being able to empty yourself, open your eyes and heart to be of service to what needs to be created is such a spiritual practice. There are so many times that I’ve gotten an idea, image or spark of inspiration from just walking through my neighborhood or in conversation with people. That idea in some ways haunts me until I actually do something about it. I’ll sit in bed at night just dreaming and seeing this whole world unfold in front of me. After I fully envision this world; I formulate a plan.



From there, the next necessary trait every successful leader needs is discipline. With creative critical thinking and inspired action, the process of creation becomes a joy ride to the finish line. In the process of creating my newest work, *The Holy Blues*, again it all started as an idea. But I took consistent research, studio time and strategic focus to get the ballet on that stage. Even on the tough days when I may have been overwhelmed with my responsibilities as a dancer with the AILEY company, I showed up to do the work needed to bring something I was so passionate about to fruition.

The final trait I find imperative for any successful business leader is your ability to collaborate. No one can do it all and that’s okay. So, whether you are the leader or a part of a team, being able to respect and activate the genius that is living in everyone involved in your project is empowering and will bring a sense ease to the work. On *The Holy Blues*, I was lucky to be a part of a wonderful team as Associate Choreographer with longtime collaborator Chalvar Monteiro and under the direction of world-renowned Choreographer/Director Jawole Willa Jo Zollar. Within this group, we found support, inspiration, and a diverse perspective that only enhanced the world we were creating.

Ok, thank you for that. Let’s now jump to the primary focus of our interview. The premise of this series assumes that our society still feels uncomfortable with strong women. Why do you think this is so?

Our society still finds discomfort in the idea of a strong woman from the fact that we are, and have been, living in a patriarchal society. It has been seen time and time again how the idea of a strong woman is often seen as either a threat or something to suppress. The very traits long-dismissed as “feminine weaknesses” — empathy, intuition, and collaboration — are increasingly recognized as the most effective tools for navigating a complex, modern world. Empowered femininity often mirrors back what one might not see in themselves. When women exhibit strength and assertiveness; they often face a double bind –penalized for being “unfeminine” if they are strong; yet dismissed as “weak” if they are nurturing. This resistance is a systemic reaction to a power shift that challenges the traditional hierarchy. Our power is in how we nurture, how we use our sensitivities, intuition and care. One must embrace those qualities within themselves in order to see them as valuable and effective within women in leadership.

Without saying any names, can you share a story from your own experience that illustrates this idea?

I've seen this most recently play out with a friend of mine as she stepped into the role of Artistic Director at an Arts School, whose role was previously filled by a man. She was offered the job and was immediately reduced to a "DEI hire" — totally diminishing her years of experience not only in the arts community but as accredited educator. She constantly had to convince her colleagues and board to trust her vision and got push back every time but she fought for what she believed in and led with a completely different energy than her predecessor. The results are undeniable and five years later the organization is being recognized through the community in ways it has never seen before.

What should a powerful woman do in a context where she feels that people are uneasy around her?

If ever you find yourself in a space where people are uneasy with your presence, shine brighter! Stand in the power of all that you are. And do NOT apologize for it. Never in a forceful or intimidating way, but in a way that inspires and empowers others to do the same. Lift people up and show them that there is enough room for everyone to shine.

What do we need to do as a society to change the unease around powerful women?

In order to change the dis-ease around powerful women we have to put more women in positions of power and practice being in that energy. Communities need to raise empowered women and reframe "feminine" qualities as high-level competencies rather than personality quirks.

In my own experience, I have observed that often women have to endure ridiculous or uncomfortable situations to achieve success that men don't have to endure. Do you have a story like this from your own experience? Can you share it with us?

Absolutely! I've seen so many of my female colleagues have to bend over backwards to get an inch of what is owed to them as highly educated, competent leaders. You see this especially in the dance and choreography industry. Because dance is considered a female-dominated field, men are welcomed and quite often rapidly promoted to high level positions while women are hit with somewhat of a glass ceiling. Men are far more likely to find success as choreographers after their dance careers even if they have less experience. It has been refreshing to see how welcoming — and honestly relieved — many colleagues are when they finally have a woman leading in this space. That's something I am really excited to see.

In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges faced by women leaders that aren't typically faced by their male counterparts?

The biggest challenge I find faced by women in leadership is having to constantly convince or prove their worth. "To be considered as capable as men, women need to be exceptional," is a quote by Charlotte Whitton that perfectly speaks to this problem.

Let's now shift our discussion to a slightly different direction. This is a question that nearly everyone with a job has to contend with. Was it difficult to fit your personal and family life into your business and career? For the benefit of our readers, can you articulate precisely what the struggle was?

It has absolutely been a struggle fitting my personal and family life into my career. As a professional dancer, to find the success I have I made the choice to move away from my family to a city with more opportunities. Once I joined my dream company, the demanding work and tour schedule began keeping me on the road nearly eight months of the year. I've sacrificed a lot for this role and there is a lot of guilt at times. I've missed birthdays, weddings, and funerals because of the life I chose. I do have to follow my heart, and the purpose God has put in my heart, but those sacrifices weigh heavily on me.

What was a tipping point that helped you achieve a greater balance or greater equilibrium between your work life and personal life? What did you do to reach this equilibrium?

Honestly, creating that balance between my work life and personal life is constant discovery. In any industry, and especially in the dance world, you come to understand that you're replaceable. Your family, however, is not. I know my value and what I bring to the table; so, when life calls, I'm comfortable now in taking my personal time. As an artist, I need to be in tune fully with whatever human experience comes my way. Living life and saying yes to all it has

to offer only enhances the work I create and give back to the world. And so, I take my days, I rest, I sit with my elders, I love my partner and I watch the sunset. At this point in my life, I work so that I can fully live.

Ok super. Here is the main question of our interview. Based on your opinion and experience, what are the “Five Things You Need To Thrive and Succeed as a Powerful Woman?” (Please share a story or example for each.)

1. Know your worth.

I thought when I joined the Ailey company I had to fit into this mold of what I saw an “Ailey woman” was. When I look back, there were moments when I did not bring all my tools and previous experience with me. But I was in the room. They wouldn’t have hired me if they didn’t think I had the qualities needed to enhance the space. So, I had to practice trusting myself, my voice and what I brought to the table. And that everyday practice allowed me to see the truth in all I had to offer.

2. Keep your word.

Doing what you said you would do is the ultimate currency that builds trust. I most recently set work on The Ailey School’s Ailey Student Performance Group which is scheduled to premiere while I’m away on this current U.S. tour. I worked with the students while we were in the thick of our preparation for our annual New York City Center season in December and had very little time with them — and honestly even less time for myself — but I had to get the ballet finished. Not only because I signed a contract, but I wanted to give the students something they could feel confident in and had to time develop. I gained the trust and confidence of the students and teachers, and I know that my track record of keeping my commitments provides evidence that shut down any gender-based narratives that may keep me from progressing forward into my next endeavor.

3. Do your work honestly.

This is actually a Reiki precept I learned when I was certified as a Reiki Master. In Reiki, “honesty” means there is no “leak” between your intention and your action. True diligence is the courage to bring your whole, intuitive self to your tasks. It’s a spiritual directive to align your outer actions with your inner truth. There is a purpose placed in my heart that I must be obedient to. If I create from a space inauthentic to what feels right for me, my intention is misplaced. The work does not flow as effortlessly trying to meet external validation rather than nurturing the project and people involved.

4. Respect the genius in the room.

This is the ultimate application of empowered femininity in leadership. When a leader respects the collective genius, they shift from being the “solver of all problems” to the architect of brilliance. In working with my collaborators for The Holy Blues, and the dancers, we were able to pull from a greater pool of information, using everyone’s personal archives to create a world that was nuanced and rooted in historical weight.

5. Trust your voice.

This is the muscle that turns internal conviction into external impact. In a world where women are often socialized to prioritize harmony, trusting your voice means accepting the fact that your perspective might disrupt that harmony. As a black female dancer, I have been socialized to be twice as good and there are still moments where stepping into the front of the room feels more like performance than an act of leadership. There’s a mix of imposter syndrome and the reality that in this dance space, historically there is an “ideal” image of what a leader looks like. The truth is: your wealth of experience is the data; your hesitation is all noise. Trust that your unique perspective adds a layer of cultural depth and resilience that the room needs.

We are very blessed that some very prominent names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them.

Yes! I would love to have a conversation with someone like Issa Rae. I have followed her career from her Awkward Black Girl series all the way to her current success as an entrepreneur. Her career is a masterclass in shifting from “awkwardly” questioning your place to unapologetically leading the room. Issa famously said, “I’m here for a reason, and I have something to say.” As I step into this new space of leadership, I am reminded that I’m not just a dancer, I am the creative director of the moment.