

The Boston Globe

Weymouth-born ballet star Matthew Neenan is back in Boston with new choreography for Alvin Ailey

By: Annie Sarlin

May 1, 2026

The Boston Globe

Serving our community since 1872

FRIDAY, MAY 1, 2026

Weymouth-born ballet star **Matthew Neenan** is back in Boston with new choreography for Alvin Ailey

By Annie Sarlin
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

In 1979, a 4-year-old Matthew Neenan made his professional dance debut in Boston Ballet's "The Nutcracker" at the Wang Theatre. This weekend, his first choreographed work for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater makes its Boston premiere on that same stage.

The dance company, which takes over the Wang through Sunday, will perform Neenan's piece, "Difference Between," on Friday and during the matinee on Saturday, as part of the group's annual Boston appearance. The shows also mark Alvin Ailey's first Boston performance under new artistic director Alicia Graf Mack.

"To have a work be presented there feels like a full circle moment," said Neenan. "I think the memories will just pop up galore, and I can't wait."

Growing up in Weymouth, the now 51-year-old dancer and choreographer performed in several Boston Ballet produc-

**ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN
DANCE THEATER**

At Boch Center Wang Theatre, 270 Tremont St. Through May 3. bochcenter.org

tions, as well as studied at the company's school with his two older sisters. Even on days he didn't have class, Neenan recalled sitting in on rehearsals to watch his siblings dance.

"Boston Ballet was our life for a good decade," said Neenan.

As a teenager, Neenan moved to New York City to study at the School of American Ballet and LaGuardia High School of Performing Arts, where he developed an interest in choreography.

In 1994, he joined Pennsylvania Ballet (now called Philadelphia Ballet), which held an annual benefit where dancers got the opportunity to choreograph their own works. After premiering his first piece for this event, Neenan was hooked

on the process.

"It was such a relief to get my own creativity out in a way that no one could tell me I couldn't do," said Neenan.

For 13 years, Neenan served as the Pennsylvania group's choreographer in residence, where he created 20 original ballets. His pieces have also been performed by companies around the country, including the New York City Ballet, the Washington Ballet, and the Pacific Northwest Ballet.

After receiving a commission to create a piece for Ailey in 2024, the choreographer proposed a dance incorporating composer Heather Christian's music, which became "Difference Between."

"There's a plethora of values about Heather's music that I love, especially for dance," Neenan said. "It's very poetic, it's very rhythmic, it's very layered, and just has a very unique sound to it."

He added, "To me, it's a choreographer's dream."



PAUL KOLNIK

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs Matthew Neenan's "Difference Between."

According to Neenan, not many choreographers have used Christian's music, and he wanted to use this opportunity to "let the dance world know about her more."

While creating "Difference Between," Neenan went to the composer's house to learn about the context behind her music, a process he said "was really helpful for my own inspiration on making the work."

In August 2025, Neenan went to Ailey to assemble the piece. Jacquelin Harris, one of the performers in "Difference

Between," described the freedom he gave the dancers during this rehearsal process.

"He really allowed us to show who we are in the steps and in the transitions and how we wanted to share his movement, which I thought was really special," said Harris. "[It] allowed us to really get to know him, and allowed him to really get to know us."

Harris, who has danced with the company for 11 seasons, believed that Neenan's work reflects the theater's mission. Founded by choreographer and

dancer Alvin Ailey in 1958, the theater "enriches the field of dance and shares the African American cultural experience," according to the troupe's website.

"The music is so beautiful," said Harris. "Being able to tap into our Ailey roots, but also combine it with [Neenan's] movement that's so heartfelt and fluid, but also rhythmic and merges perfectly with the music, it was true creation as artists."

Annie Sarlin can be reached at annie.sarlin@globe.com.