

Hearing Loss Couldn't Stop Samantha Figgins from Mesmerizing the Masses

"I'm trying to be the person that I needed when I was younger."

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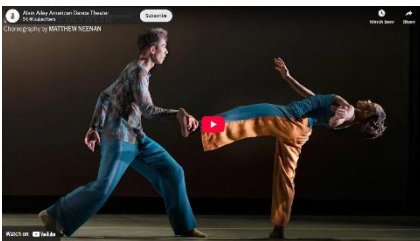
Something about the way the dancers' bodies moved made me feel weak. Not in a "coming down with the flu" way, but instead as if I was suddenly softening like candle wax. I looked around at faces similarly entranced. There was something so vulnerable about how the dancers moved to the music, with an intuition that gently chipped away at the world sitting on our collective shoulders.

During a December performance in New York, I watched Alvin Ailey dancers perform a piece called "Difference Between," which was all at once energizing and melancholic. I had no idea what the choreography meant to convey — I'm, after all, not a "dance person" — but I was somehow seeing and hearing moments of longing and fear, and later in the piece, a reckoning with a beautiful new beginning.

"We have our ups and our downs as dancers, and we are so lucky and blessed to have work that we can pour ourselves into — that we can use our personal experience to enrich the movement and the story that has already been given to us," says Samantha Figgins, of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and one of the dancers I was watching on stage. "What a gift it is, for us."

Months later, when I got to sit down and chat with Figgins, she agreed that the piece I watched, choreographed by Matthew Neenan, was profoundly emotional. "I think it's a piece about longing, traveling and migration as well — those journeys that we all go through," she says. "There can be a lot of grief there. You might be leaving behind family, relationships, or even a version of yourself."

Figgins, who is hearing impaired, began her dance journey with ballet as a child in Washington, D.C., and learned early how emotions can transfer from the stage into the audience. Recently, she choreographed an integral piece for Ailey's 2025 season titled "Holy Blues," channeling her own feelings about love, loss, grief, and the spirit of Gospel to tell a luminous and haunting story through movement.



In the pieces I watched last winter, Figgins and her castmates became the vehicles for poignant, galvanizing messages about community and resistance. Figgins says it's all intentional; while she's telling a very personal story, she wants to communicate hope and strength. "We're not equipped to be taking in all this information — like global terror — it's a lot on the collective nervous system. And so I think coming to an Ailey performance is an opportunity to let that all go," she tells me.

In the sun-drenched dance studio where Figgins is perched in front of me in deep reflection, it's evident that she is on a journey of being more transparent about her personal life and the way she sees herself. She only just started openly discussing her disability a few years ago — the hearing loss in her right ear is due to a childhood bout of meningitis — and how it has influenced how she works, creates, and sees herself.

There's something revolutionary about seeing disability of any sort as a pillar of your identity, rather than a flaw that requires fixing. Figgins has finally been able to recognize a sense of abundance; how "full," as she describes it, she



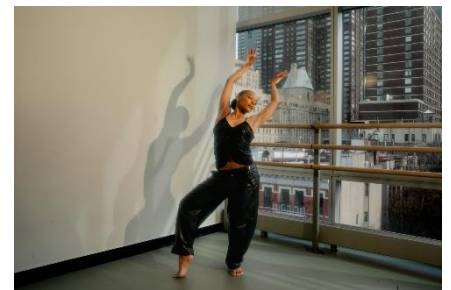
is as a person. “There’s something that’s called Deaf Gain. There’s so much that you gain from your deafness and your deaf identity, and I’ve learned so much about how to handle my emotions and the truth of who I am with my hearing journey, that it just has enriched me,” she says.

This butterfly moment brazenly shows up for Figgins both on stage and in her personal life. “It allows other people to show up for me and for me to show up for other people. But it took me a while to get here,” she tells me. “When I was younger, I didn’t want to speak too much about my hearing loss,

because as a dancer, everything’s so fast-paced. I didn’t want to show that I have a weakness that might keep the group back.”

As Figgins grew up and gained more professional experience, she wondered how her hearing loss might limit her. And so she carried it all quietly, bent to fit expectations and navigated every space accordingly. “As a Black woman, you work twice as hard — but now I’m working four times as hard to stay on track with what everybody else is,” she says. “I just did not want to highlight my differences in that way, because not a lot of people understand.”

Figgins had a substantial support system, however, in her twin sister, who served as her best friend and interpreter. But at some point, Figgins knew she’d need to fly solo. She describes finally being able to get a hearing aid when she got a salary that included health insurance, and how liberating that was. When she began learning ASL during the pandemic, she saw parallels in the value of intentional movement — whether it be facial cues while signing or a glissade on stage — in conveying a message.



“I feel so much better that I speak more openly about my disability now because I’m not alone in it anymore. It was very isolating,” she says. “I’m [now] trying to make more space for other people like me. I’m trying to be the person that I needed when I was younger.” With freedom and power, Figgins believes, comes crucial responsibility. She’s doing her best to inform her co-workers and artistic staff on how to create more inclusive, accessible spaces for people with differences in ability. And they’ve been very receptive.

Figgins’ shift in perspective has allowed her to focus not only on new dance projects in which she assumes a leadership role, but also on ways she can open her world to young people who’d benefit from embracing the arts. She recalls, not too long ago at Ailey, being part of a re-performance event for kids with disabilities — many were deaf or blind. She and her colleagues hung out with them, brought out costumes for them to see or touch, and even taught them some dance moves.



“It was amazing to see them move, and I was like, ‘There are some artistic geniuses in this group,’” Figgins tells me. “But they’re sometimes left behind. People don’t often think disabled people don’t have much to offer, which is really sad, because [these kids] are so creative. So we need to be more creative with our solutions.” It’s painfully evident, right now, how much we need more creative geniuses than “stable” ones.

Figgins is part of a movement of artists adamantly working to shift the way disability is perceived. This means dismantling the attitudes that led her to constantly quiet a part of herself to grow as an artist.

And it might take a lifetime. But being able to get on stage and melt people into softer versions of themselves while doing it? That’s a gift.