



## Interview: ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER's Samantha Figgins

*Returning to a hometown stage*

By: Emily Berger

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DC native Samantha Figgins returns to the district for 11 performances with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at the Warner Theatre, the first stop on a 20 city US tour.

While Figgins has performed with the company for many years, this visit home will include her first performances as a choreographer. I caught up with Figgins about her dancing, her choreographic debut *The Holy Blues*, and why she's as energized as ever to bring dance to her hometown.

Hi Samantha. How are you feeling going into this tour?

Good, thanks. I've been resting a lot since the [Ailey] company's winter season ended and I'm excited to kick off this tour. Being in DC is always such a full-circle moment because I get to perform for the teachers and dance community that raised me. It's such an incredible opportunity to show my community how I was able to take their wisdom and lessons and turn that into something. I hope I can also be a model for students in the Washington area, especially those at Duke Ellington [High School of the Arts] where I went.

We are also in DC a little longer this year and performing at the Warner. I'm grateful for a bit more time here and hope DC audiences take advantage.

What are you most excited to be dancing in this season?

Always Mr. Ailey's works. This season I'm grateful to be dancing the lead in *Night Creature*. I love the classic Duke Ellington score. *Embrace* by Fredrick Earl Mosley is also fantastic. It's got great popular music that's just so fun to move to. It's about messy, beautiful human connections and how with love, we can embrace the journeys of life.



Matthew Neenan's debut for the company is also one of my favorites. It feels abstract but also playful. The music is just beautiful and the contemporary ballet steps have challenged me in a good way. We have so many great works in the repertory. I learn something new about myself every time I perform them, and they speak to each other.

The company is also performing a work by you! Tell me about *The Holy Blues*

Yes! I am so excited and proud to be bringing my choreography to DC. *The Holy Blues* is a piece that I co-choreographed with my fellow - now former - company member Chalvar Monteiro and the incredible Jawole Willa Jo Zollar who created *Urban Bush Women*.

The work is an invitation to explore the sacred and secular and how often pain and joy are present at the same time. It's about what we think about when we see the hopefulness of a blue sky or the sorrow of a deep ocean.

It was inspired by the Ring Shout, a West African circular dance and *The Door of No Return*, the final point of departure of enslaved Africans sent to America. We also found a quotation of Mr. Ailey's in his journals that really resonated. "My roots are also in the Gospel church, the Gospel churches of the south where I grew up...holy blues—paeans to joy, anthems to the human spirit."

And that was our starting point. An idea that the blues are both holy and secular, encompassing joy and pain.

We started with a residency, working with students at FSU. We had an idea and just started writing index cards with movements, phrases, quotations, and facts that we thought might have a place in the work somewhere.

I was really inspired by Imani Perry's book "Black in Blues," which is about the importance of the color blue in the African American experience. Chalvar brought research and ideas from his parents' experiences in Jamaica. We put ideas together from everywhere, including from the dancers and their experiences. So many social dances use circles as a way to bring people together, and you'll see that in the piece. Dance has been tied to protest and exultation and community in so many cities and places. There's even a little reference to go-go for my DC family.

Oh, I can't wait to see that. So the work is about community?

Yes and resilience. Once you pass through the Door of No Return, slaves had only what they could carry on their backs and remember of the rituals and lessons from their home country. They had to create a new spiritual practice. So the piece is about how we move forward and learn to use these new rituals to support each other in a new strange land. The dancers only leave the stage once in the entire piece. It's very physically demanding. That's the nature of life; we just have to keep going.

Are you hoping to continue to choreograph?

Absolutely. I'm currently choreographing for Ailey's student performance group and look forward to coming back to DC to work with [Duke Ellington High School of the Arts] students. Right now I just enjoy being of service and creating work that the world needs, wherever the call is and for whatever group of dancers that is.

Two final questions. First, it's January. What are your resolutions for the year?

So many things. I'm finishing up a dance film and sending it to festivals. I also am deaf in one ear and remain focused on my work as an advocate for the deaf community. I recently joined the advisory board for HuffPost so I will be curating articles to center work by artists who are differently abled.

During COVID I was certified as a reiki master, so this year I want to start hands on practice. Don't get me wrong - I use it all the time from the stage. I have the opportunity to convey to the audience daily, to flow into the room and give healing. Or at least help to wake something up so they can heal themselves.

And then on the road especially I have a number of crochet projects. Working on a blanket for my mom right now!

And last question. If someone has been living under a rock and has never seen Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, why should they come out to the Warner and see a performance?

Oh, they should come see the company so they can be moved and transformed spiritually, emotionally and physically. I'm serious. The dancers bring joy, compassion and humanity to the stage. You will see yourself in anyone onstage.

If you are burdened, you will have your pain relieved and see new strength within yourself. It's inspirational to see the human experience embodied and everyone's ability to triumph. We all have access to that. [Seeing Ailey] wakes something up in you and drives you to keep going and stretch to your limit.

We love what we're doing, and audiences feel that.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs from January 30-February 8 at the Warner Theatre. For tickets, visit <https://ailey.org/series/washington-dc>.