

From Boston Arts Academy To Alvin Ailey, Local Dancer Finds Success Through Struggle

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To the students at the Boston Arts Academy (BAA), Belen Pereyra is a rock star.

A Lawrence native, she currently dances with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York, a world-renowned modern dance company famous for its diverse ensemble and expressive movement. She came back to Boston this winter to teach a master class at her alma mater, showing students that dancing professionally is possible, and that you can get there from the BAA.

Pereyra often returns for performances and classes — for her, working with the students is less about teaching movement, and more about the life lessons she can impart.

“I feel like sometimes they take it for granted, so I really go there with a mission to inform them of how fortunate they are,” she says after teaching a class in January, tucking into a crepe at a café in Allston. “You are literally being handed a gift. A ticket out. A ticket to do something fun and creative with your life.”

Pereyra joins other Ailey members in Boston this weekend, hosted by Celebrity Series, for their spring tour.

Pereyra began dancing as a child in Lawrence, taking everything from Peruvian folk dance to hip-hop. Already determined to become a professional dancer, she auditioned for and began attending the Boston Arts Academy in the 9th grade. Every day she commuted to Boston and back, often getting on the train before 6 a.m., and not returning home until after 10 p.m.

This was her routine until junior year, when she was nearly kicked out of school. Despite requiring auditions for admissions, BAA is a public school. So, living in Lawrence, Pereyra’s enrollment was technically illegal.

“They had to sit us down, the principal, the teachers and our parents, and it was like, ‘This is very serious,’ ” she remembers. “They said, ‘We don’t want you guys to leave, but you don’t live here, this is illegal. You’ve been lying to us.’ ”

Rather than leave school, Pereyra left home. She established Boston residency by moving in with Musau Dibinga, the managing director of OrigiNation Cultural Arts Center. Pereyra had begun to take classes at OrigiNation after school, but the pair had known each other for less than a year.

“Thank god for Musau,” says Pereyra, laughing. “I can’t imagine now that I’m an adult how you let a teenager in your house to live with you for that long a time! I was so thankful.”

She adds, “I don’t know what I would have done if I had ended up in Lawrence. I wouldn’t be dancing. Not at this level.”

Dibinga admits the situation was strange, but she remembers the year fondly.

“I didn’t even hesitate. It was her spirit — I saw the way she carried herself, treated other people,” she says. “Something drew me to her. I had to give her this chance.”

Pereyra went on to graduate as valedictorian, but soon learned that due to her immigration status, she was ineligible for federal financial aid. She has since become a permanent resident, but having moved to the United States from the Dominican Republic when she was four, at the time she had not begun the process.



“I was confused,” she explains, noting that at the time, she was too young to fully grasp what any of it meant. “I couldn’t understand why I couldn’t get financial aid like everyone else — all they would say was ‘You are not a resident of this country.’ ”

No financial aid complicated a collegiate pre-professional education. With low confidence and, as she put it, 10 pounds overweight, she moved in with Sheryl Tomas, co-department chair of dance at the Boston Arts Academy and cobbled together a routine of odd jobs, BAA classes and summer work-study programs at places like Jose Mateo. This became her routine for four years until her exposure led

her to the Earl Mosley's Institute of the Arts.

It was there she was seen by Camille A. Brown, the artistic director of Camille A. Brown & Dancers in New York City.

“Camille gave me my big break,” Pereyra says. “I didn’t even get to work with her, but she saw me dancing and asked me to be in her company.”

Pereyra began commuting to New York on weekends to dance for Camille A. Brown & Dancers. Eventually she moved there permanently and began yet another work-study program — this time at the Alvin Ailey Extension program.

For two and a half years, Pereyra took attendance, checking in other students for the chance to take an Ailey class — it took her six months to work up the courage to actually use the classes she had accumulated. She also worked at Applebee’s and Häagen-Dazs to stay afloat — her last job before becoming an Ailey dancer was at Best Buy.

“I decided I was sick of the struggle. I just wanted to do what I loved,” she says about her decision to finally audition for Ailey. “It’s really uncomfortable to be working at Best Buy and trying to maintain your dance career. So I thought, ‘This is it. I don’t want a Plan B.’ ”

Throwing everything into Plan A, she spent a year preparing for the audition. She analyzed the dancers, figuring out what they looked like and the technique they used, and changed her own body and movement to match. She gained muscle, lost weight and spent every day convincing herself that the job was hers.



After auditioning in 2011, she officially became a dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

“I called everybody I loved, and we were all just on the phone screaming,” says Pereyra, laughing as she remembers the moment. “They really understood what it took — for so many years I worked with such fear in my heart, such shame.”

Back in Boston, Musau Dibinga was thrilled.

“The first time I saw her onstage, I was in tears,” recalls Dibinga. “It was emotional, because she went through so much to get there — even today we get emotional, because the odds ... it’s what she wanted to do, and she made it.”

Grateful for the obstacles, Pereyra believes if she’d had a linear path, she would not be the dancer she is now, nor would she have made it into Ailey at all.

“I feel this is not an accident. I feel I have this big responsibility to do my best,” she says. “I take it very seriously. It’s exciting, it’s rewarding. And it’s a privilege.”

Belen Pereyra returns to Boston this weekend with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater through the Celebrity Series from Thursday, April 27 to Sunday, April 30.