

Dancer Uses Sign Language in New Alvin Ailey Virtual Season

By: Stephanie Simon

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Watch here: <https://spectrumlocalnews.com/nys/rochester/news/2020/12/02/dancer-uses-sign-language-in-new-alvin-ailey-virtual-season#>
(2 minutes)

For Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's first ever virtual season, a dancer and choreographer with a shared experience of partial deafness find a new way to make their artistry even more inclusive. While helping to choreograph a new work, Yusha-Marie Sorzano wondered about including American Sign Language.

"I have hearing loss in both of my ears and so I have always been advised to get hearing aids but they were always too expensive for me to get when I was younger, so I just went through my career as a performing artist without them," said Sorzano.

She found an ally and soloist in Ailey dancer Samantha Figgins.

"I'm deaf fully in one ear and same as Yusha, hearing aids were too expensive when I was younger. I was able to just go through my life without hearing aids and make it to this amazing place," said Figgins, on a joint Zoom with Sorzano.

Figgins' solo is part of a new dance called Testament, which will premiere as part of Ailey's new season. Rehearsals took place at the Ailey Center in midtown, but the works were filmed around the city.



"I think the solo for both of us came out of our own "othering" of ourselves, not feeling like we fit in and then the resilience that we developed in order to succeed," said Sorzano.

Of course there were challenges in incorporating American Sign Language or ASL, because many signs can have several different meaning.

"So it's all in the facial expression. So it was really difficult wearing the mask because with only partial facial expressions, you can only see what my eyebrows are doing and with that the whole story is not being told, and that's what a lot of people are dealing with right now, especially the deaf and hard of hearing community," said Figgins.

This entire season celebrates the 60th anniversary of Alvin Ailey's Signature piece, "Revelations." All the dances on the program reflect the hopeful spirit of the Revelations, but also Ailey's belief that dance could celebrate and give a voice to the African American experience, and be used as a form of peaceful protest.

"I'd like to think that people may be able to walk away recognizing the systems of oppression that we have continued to fall into and also recognizing that the work that has to be done could bring us to a place where we might feel joy again," said Sorzano

The December Ailey Season is completely free but donations are welcome. For more details, go to AlvinAiley.org.