

Northwest School Of The Arts Alum Returns With Alvin Ailey Dance Troupe

By: Gwendolyn Glenn

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The world-renowned, New York-based Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater troupe was on stage Wednesday night at the Belk Theater for the second night of a two-night run. Performing with the modern dance company is Charlottean Constance Stamatiou. She has performed at the White House and been a guest performer on the "Today Show," "So You Think You Can Dance" and "Dancing with the Stars."

In her early years, Stamatiou performed with the Charlotte Ballet and she's a graduate of Charlotte's Northwest School of the Arts. WFAE's "All Things Considered" host Gwendolyn Glenn talked to her just before rehearsals Wednesday about how her training at Northwest help shape her career.

Constance Stamatiou: Northwest definitely prepared me. It's a visual performing arts school and the dance department offered so many techniques. I wasn't just open to ballet. They also taught me modern and jazz. It was a very well-rounded dance department and I had so many wonderful teachers. And, you know, they're the ones that inspired me to become a professional dancer that I am today. Actually, a few of them are coming for the performance (Wednesday).

Gwendolyn Glenn: I understand that you started taking dance, various types of dance early -- about (age) 5. Was that audition with the Charlotte Ballet your first audition? And I understand you weren't too happy about it back then?

Stamatiou: Charlotte Ballet was called the North Carolina Dance Theater, and I was outside playing, being a kid. And my mom pulled me aside and said, "Get in the car, we're going to an audition." I was like, "I don't want to go to an audition. I want to play." So I auditioned for North Carolina Dance Theater's "Nutcracker." And all I know is the director of the dance company called out my mom, and said, "Who is Constance Stamatiou's mother?" And they offered me a full scholarship to train at their school.

Glenn: And you were in "The Nutcracker" that year?

Stamatiou: Yeah, I performed in "The Nutcracker."

Glenn: So what changed for you? Going from not really wanting to do this to falling in love with it?

Stamatiou: I think it is just something I've always enjoyed doing. But honestly, until I hit high school and one of my dance teachers at Northwest School of the Arts, Susan Thorsland, she asked me one day, she said, "Are you going to school for gymnastics or are you going to go to school for dance?" Because at the time, I was a competitive gymnast and I don't think I ever thought about that. And that day was when I decided I want to be a dancer. I want to be a professional dancer. So she helped me get together a solo to audition. I had auditioned for the Ailey School, Fordham BFA program. I auditioned for SUNY Purchase, Juilliard. I ended up going to SUNY Purchase.



Glenn: And that's in New York?

Stamatiou: Yes. And actually one of my teachers from SUNY, she asked if I knew what I was doing that summer. And I told her probably, "You know, follow my friends and go to the Dance Theatre of Harlem." She said, "No I want you to come with me and check out Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater." And once I went there for the summer, I fell in love. And I was like, "Mom, Dad -- I don't think I'm going back to Purchase. I think I belong here." And I've stayed ever since.

Glenn: What grabbed you about the Alvin Ailey Dance School? What really drew you in?

Stamatiou: The culture. You know, I had never seen so many dancers from all over the world that came to this one place to study. And so many dancers that looked like me, and then see all the power and the heart that they put into the performance. It was just intoxicating.

Glenn: So when you were in Charlotte and prior to the Alvin Ailey Dance School and then the company, were you normally the only person of color?

Stamatiou: Yes, for the most part. I always felt like I was that token child. You know, it was either just me or maybe one other dancer of color or gymnast on the team.

Glenn: So you are performing Wednesday night and you performed Tuesday night to a sold-out audience. Tell us about the roles you will be dancing in with the Alvin Ailey Dance troupe here in Charlotte.

Stamatiou: Well, (Wednesday), I am honored with performing Mr. Ailey's masterpiece, "Cry." "Cry" is about a 60-minute solo that he choreographed (with) the legendary Judith Jamison, who was the director when she hired me in '07. And it was a solo that he gifted to his mother as a birthday gift and dedicated it to women of color everywhere, especially our mothers. And so it's very special for me (Wednesday night) that I am able to perform it in my hometown, in front of my mother, in front of my daughter. And my daughter's actually gonna be the one presenting me with flowers when I take my bows tonight, so it's really, really special.