Dancer Belén Indhira Pereyra returns to Boston with Alvin Ailey
By: Shira Laucharoen
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Dancer Belén Indhira Pereyra learned at a young age that dance is a language of its own. Born in the Dominican Republic and raised in Lawrence, Massachusetts, Pereyra got her first taste of the art form when she was seven years old and joined a traditional Peruvian dance group, led by a woman who just wanted to share her culture. From there, she joined Lawrence Ballet Academy, where she learned the vocabulary behind the steps and began to learn hip-hop and jazz. But once she enrolled at Boston Arts Academy for high school, her passion for dance flourished, and she discovered the style that she most connects to: modern.

“I love the earthiness of it,” said Pereyra. “Ballet is absolutely stunning. I grew up being mesmerized by it and the magic of it. But what I love about modern dance is the bare feet, the grounding of the pelvis, the rawness. There’s a humanness to it. We’re not trying to be perfect. We’re trying to contort ourselves in all the mysterious ways that our bodies are capable of and expressing really deep emotions of all ranges. In ballet, there’s an element of perfection that is aimed for. And in modern dance, there’s just so many more colors that I can reach and that I can express.”

It was also at Boston Arts Academy that Pereyra began to envision herself as a dancer with a professional life in the arts. “No one was going to shake me out of this dream,” said Pereyra. “In high school, it became very clear that it was a possibility, that it is a career path. Growing up, not just in the Hispanic community, but just in general, the arts is something that sometimes can be frowned upon, as in it’s not a real career and it won’t pay the bills. A part of me wasn’t sure how realistic the path was. But when I got influenced by all the incoming teachers, choreographers and guest speakers, it was very obvious that many people are leading fruitful lives on this path, and why can’t I?”

Pereyra now dances with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York. The company will come to Boston for the first time since 2019, before the start of the pandemic, as part of Celebrity Series’ “The Movement Series” (April 28-May 1), which will center works celebrating Black culture. Some of the dances that she will perform include “Love Stories,” a joyful ballet inspired by the African concept of “Sankofa,” which teaches that “we don’t know where we’re going unless we know where we have been.” She will also dance in “For Four,” capturing the energy of coronavirus times, “Blues Suite” and “BUSK,” a crowd favorite. Pereyra will also be a part of “Holding Space” and the spiritual “Revelations,” created by Ailey in 1960 and known as the choreographer’s major masterpiece.

“The pandemic, for me, was a rebirth. It was an opportunity to recalibrate, recenter, and recreate myself,” said Pereyra. “Coming back to Boston was a huge celebration of that awakening, that rebirth. It’s an opportunity to share all the growth I’ve experienced in the center of my heart and share it in a very powerful, potent way, as generously as I can. Boston has given me so much, and I have so many people in Boston whom I love, who have shaped my career, who have shaped my life in ways that I can never thank enough.”

While Alvin Ailey himself was a Black artist, and “The Movement Series” represents an honoring of Black culture, Pereyra said that she does not think of racial differences when she is performing. “I don’t really think of race, at all,” said Pereyra. “I think of the soul. For me, it’s less about Black excellence, because I believe we’re all excellent, including Black excellence. I think Mr. Ailey was about all people, and I think he was about integrating and merging, blending the lines, completely dismantling these segregated ideas of putting people into categories and sectioning them off. I’m about that. To me, that’s my path, as well as Mr. Ailey’s. I’m so grateful and humbled to be in this company, that walks that path, that is led by a man who wanted to go beyond his skin, to others.”

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs at the Boch Center Wang Theatre, as part of the Celebrity Series of Boston, April 28-May 1.