A determined dancer
By: Terry Date
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The Lawrence child’s dreams, confusion and determination moved her body and lifted her into the air time and again.

Belen Indhira Pereyra’s rhythmic steps, turns and leaps drew notice. Her mother and dance instructors saw her joy and need to dance, and gave her places to move, chances to stumble and room to grow. Pereyra, 35, stepped on to a world stage a decade ago, landing in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, cultural emissaries who have performed for some 25 million people in 48 states, and 71 countries on six continents.

The troupe, renowned for grace and expression and physicality, has electrified audiences for generations, leaving unsuspecting patrons delirious with appreciation. Its 32 dancers perform in Boston this week — April 28-May 1 — in the Celebrity Series at the Boch Center’s Wang Theatre. It’s a homecoming for Pereyra. Boston was a turning point for her. As a teen she studied at Boston Arts Academy, commuting by bus and train daily from Lawrence, 1 hour 40 minutes to get there and the same on the return trip.

But her dance story starts back before she can remember. She once asked her mother, Belen Tournas — a Lawrence High school teacher who retired in 2021 after 26 years — how she knew to give her the opportunity to dance. Tournas and her four children moved to the U.S. in 1991 from the Dominican Republic. Belen was 4 at the time. In kindergarten, at a Christmas party, Belen was dancing with her teacher and her mother witnessed a joy and natural rhythm in her daughter and decided to enroll her in dance classes.

Pereyra danced in Lawrence with the Peruvian Association and with Quity Morgan of the Lawrence Ballet Academy, training in folk, ballet, hip hop, jazz and other styles. She remembers dancing as a sanctuary for her. Movement gave her a place to express a range of emotions including the mystery and confusion she felt, the anger, frustration and sadness she knew. “When the door closed, all I had to focus on was being in the moment and being in my body, and having my body do intricate things,” she said. “That was my introduction into understanding myself.”

Pereyra attended the Rollins and Leonard schools in Lawrence. By Grade 7 she knew she wanted to dance. She was convinced she would get sick if she didn’t. An avenue to dance appeared. Three years earlier another Lawrence dancer, Lunara Devers, had blazed a trail by traveling from Lawrence to study dance at the Boston Arts Academy. Pereyra followed in her footsteps, as did several other Lawrence girls, none of whom were shy about claiming their Lawrence roots. This, however, landed them in a pickle. Officials told her that, per city rules, she had to live in Boston to attend the school. A dance instructor, Musau Dibinga of OrigiNation Cultural Arts Center, stepped forward and took Pereyra into her home.

Pereyra graduated and was class valedictorian. She was riding high but misfortune brought her down. A full college scholarship fell through when she missed a deadline. Over the summer she injured her ankle and gained weight. She attended a college with a less than challenging dance program and her heart wasn’t in it so she quit school. Until then she had thought all she needed to do was work very hard and success would follow. She had worked hard but realized she needed to plan and organize diligently and nurture and enjoy her progress. She returned to Boston Arts Academy and enrolled in work study programs, and danced with multiple dance companies. She rededicated herself to the discipline of dance and reclaimed her dream.
“I kept pushing and growing and one summer got a scholarship with the EMIA dance program in Connecticut,” she said. She was mentored by Earl Mosley. She was noticed and given the opportunity to dance in New York. For a year she rode the bus from Boston to New York each weekend, 8 hours roundtrip, to rehearse and dance. She danced with the Camille A. Brown & Dancers. She moved to New York where she waited tables at Applebee’s and worked retail at Best Buy — and danced. She sought additional instruction at the Alvin Ailey school in exchange for work, and observed how a few Ailey company dancers took adult education classes with the legendary Russian ballet teacher Madame Darvash. Pereyra did the same.

She started to see herself as an Ailey dancer. Alvin Ailey dancer Michael Jackson Jr. came aboard the company at the same time as Pereyra — in 2011. “Belen is such a powerful mover, and she is expressive in her body,” he said. “We (Alvin Ailey) have storytellers. They can tell a story without opening their mouth. Belen is one of the queen storytellers in the company.” The modern dance company was founded in 1958 by Alvin Ailey, who grew up in rural Texas. He introduced and developed a uniquely American vision of dance steeped in the blues, spirituality and the resilience of Black Americans.

“The work is so deep,” Jackson said. “I feel so lucky. Not everyone gets to do what they love.” The company tours the nation from February to May. The dancers then get a break before embarking on two-month international tour and then a 5-week season through December in New York. In Boston they will be performing three programs.

One program will feature new works and is called “Holding Space”; the second program includes the greatest works of Artistic Director Robert Battle, among them “For Four” and “Ella”; and the third program presents the greatest works of Alvin Ailey. Ailey’s masterwork “Revelations” will be performed in all three programs. Pereyra is committed to continued growth, to developing her spiritual qualities and bringing them forth in her dance.

What advice would she have for a young dancer? “You have to enjoy the process,” she said. To become a professional dancer is not an end in itself, she said. “It’s not like you reach the ‘Aha’ moment,” she said. “There is another level.” Belen’s mother says her daughter was always singing and dancing as a child. She’s still dancing. “She is a hard worker who loved to dance and made a lot of sacrifices to dance,” Tournas said. “I always say to her ‘I love you and I am proud of you.’”