

Los Angeles Times

Danica Paulos will return to O.C. with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

By: Kathleen Luppi
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Danica Paulos can recall the moment she knew she wanted to be a dancer.

"My grandmother took me to see 'The Nutcracker' when I was 5 years old, and during intermission, I was dancing in the aisles," Paulos said.

Paulos, who grew up in Huntington Beach, was speaking last week from Boston, where she was performing with the 2016 tour of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

The 20-city national tour will bring the company to the Segerstrom Center for the Arts for six performances from April 6 to 10. The program includes eight works that have never been performed at the center, four Southern California premieres and new productions of Ailey classics.

The three new dances include Robert Battle's "Awakening," created as an interpretation of a community on a journey from lamentation to peace. The movement is Battle's first world premiere since becoming artistic director of the dance theater. Also on the bill is "Exodus," in which hip-hop choreographer Rennie Harris explores the steps toward enlightenment.

Also new is "Open Door," a Cuban-inspired work by choreographer Ronald K. Brown, who is known for his blend of modern dance and West African idioms.

The "Open Door" is set to the sounds of Arturo O'Farrill and the Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra, featuring songs from their recently released "Cuba: The Conversation Continues," which was recorded in Havana days after President Obama announced a warming of relations between the countries.

The company, which will make its seventh visit to the center, will showcase an artistry and spirit of dance that dates to 1958, when it was founded by Alvin Ailey and a group of young African American modern dancers. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has gone on to perform for an estimated 25 million people at theaters in 48 states and 71 countries.

Paulos said a place in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is the ultimate achievement.

She began her dance training at Orange County Dance Center in Huntington Beach. She also studied in Los Angeles with the semi-private Yuri Grigoriev School of Ballet. Paulos finished her freshman year at Fountain Valley High School followed by her sophomore and junior years at Huntington Beach High School, where she was enrolled in the school's Academy for the Performing Arts.

By senior year, she was in New York, where she graduated from the Professional Performing Arts School.

Paulos trained at The Ailey School as a scholarship student and attended summer intensive at The Juilliard School, both in New York, and the Kirov Academy of Ballet, in Washington, D.C.

Dancing with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has allowed her to carry on the founder's legacy of uniting and celebrating the human spirit, she said.

"I draw from a lot of people I work with," Paulos said of finding inspiration. "I call them 'superheroes' because what we do is mentally, physically and emotionally exhausting but exhilarating on stage."

The company has an unusually high profile and a level of recognition that most concert dance troupes can only dream of. Soon after the presidential inauguration in 2009, the entire Obama family was present when the troupe performed at the Kennedy Center.

A U.S. congressional resolution designated the company "a vital American cultural ambassador to the world" that celebrates the African American cultural experience and American modern dance heritage.

To mark its tour stop in Orange County, the troupe will begin with "Revelations Celebration," a free event on April 3 that will welcome visitors to participate and engage with company performers and teaching artists, who will demonstrate movements from three of the troupe's most well-known pieces, including "Rocka My Soul," "Wade in the Water" and "I've Been 'Buked."

Paulos, who will make her debut at the Segerstrom Center, said she is excited to perform on the stage where she has seen several shows and cultural performances.

"I'll definitely be very reverent," Paulos said.

About her approach to the work, she said, "When I go on stage, I try to be 100% selfless because I'm trying to say something with my movement and I'm telling a story. It's awesome to be performing."

IF YOU GO

What: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

When: 7:30 p.m. April 6 to 8, 2 and 7:30 p.m. April 9 and 1 p.m. April 10

Where: Segerstrom Center for the Arts, 600 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa

Cost: Tickets start at \$29

Information: (714) 556-2787 or visit scfta.org