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'I can't believe I'm up here'

STEVEN BROWN

For as long as she could remember, Constance Stamatiou had danced. She loved the excitement of being before an audience. But this was different.

The setting: the Alvin Ailey School in New York City. Stamatiou, a graduate of Charlotte's Northwest School of the Arts, followed her freshman year of college with Ailey's summer program.

"Something just clicked," she recalls. "I started dancing like I never danced before.

"I said to myself, 'I think I'm going to stay here ... and see if that leads anywhere.' "

Did it ever. She progressed through the Ailey school and on to the training company Ailey II. Last June, four years after that summer program, Stamatiou moved up to the flagship troupe. When Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater visits Belk Theatre next weekend, it will be her homecoming.

For nearly a half-century, Ailey's modern-dance company has embodied dance's power to enthrall international audiences. Stamatiou, 23, is working with performers she watched as a girl on TV and in documentaries -- such as Judith Jamison, the legendary Ailey dancer who's now the company's artistic director. She sees people around her "doing things that are out of this world," she says. That demands action.

"By training yourself and pushing yourself," she says, "you see yourself growing and doing things you never thought you could do."

'We used to be amazed'

Usually it's a mere figure of speech to say someone has done this or that her whole life. Not this time. Barbara Stamatiou remembers her daughter moving to a Patti LaBelle song at less than a year old -- when she had just started to walk. As a 2-year-old, Constance could match gyrations with TV's Pee-wee Herman. "We used to be amazed at the way she could dance," (mom's first name) Stamatiou says. "She was very swift."

When Constance was around 4 years old, her parents enrolled her at Pat Hall's Dance Unlimited, a Charlotte school near where her mother worked. Within a few years, her mother says, she caught onto routines quickly enough that she helped other children master *their* parts.

The budding dancer also took classes at N.C. Dance Theatre. In Salvatore Aiello's "Nutcracker," she was one of the little babushka dolls scrambling behind the big babushka.

When Stamatiou reached the sixth grade, she entered the dance program at Northwest School of the Arts. Meanwhile, she maneuvered her schedule to make room for her second interest: gymnastics.



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater photo

Constance Stamatiou, who graduated from Northwest School of the Arts, performs here next weekend with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.



Her other passion

It's easy to see how the two pursuits might complement each other. Stamatiou's gymnastics coaches took advantage of her dance training, she says, by having her choreograph her own floor routines. In the other direction, gymnastics forged her mentally for "being daring enough to go for it."

"In gymnastics," she says, "you're flipping backwards on a little three-inch beam. That's a lot scarier than jumping into someone's arms."

By the time Stamatiou reached high school, she had "everything it took to go further," said Susan Thorsland, who joined Northwest's faculty while Stamatiou was there. She had a gift for jumps and flexibility. She had "a beautiful body -- the arms and legs and length they're looking for." And when she stepped onstage, she was in her element.

"She obviously enjoyed it," Thorsland said. "For an audience, that makes a difference."

Yet as graduation neared, Stamatiou wasn't sure what to do. She nearly accepted a gymnastics scholarship to the University of Georgia, Thorsland says.

So Thorsland framed the decision for her student this way: If you go into gymnastics in college, what will you do after graduation? Become a coach?

"I *could* have done that," Stamatiou recalls. But the idea didn't have much appeal. She landed a spot in the dance program at the State University of New York at Purchase, outside New York City.

Thorsland, looking back, thinks that Stamatiou may just have needed a nudge.

"I don't think she even know what a great dancer she was."

Inspired by the energy

Seeing the Ailey company perform was the turning point.

"I loved the energy they brought out on the stage," Stamatiou says.

"I realized, 'I want to be a part of this group. I want to be on that stage ... performing for all of these people.' " After the Ailey summer, Stamatiou never returned to college. In Ailey II's nationwide tours, she not only gained experience onstage, but also encouraged other aspiring dancers in workshops. That, she says, "helps your self-esteem."

"It makes you feel like you've accomplished something."

Last spring, Stamatiou won her place in the main Ailey troupe. When Jamison told her that she was in, Stamatiou says, "It was like your feet just slipped right out from under you."

She got back onto them quickly. The summer was devoted to rehearsals. In September, she had her debut.

"I was, 'Wow, I can't believe I'm up here, with people I never imagined dancing with,' " she says. "It was definitely a dream come true. At the same time, you're trying to focus and tell yourself, 'OK, make sure you don't forget the step because you're so excited to be onstage.'"

"Even Judith Jamison could see it. She would say, 'You're a part of this company now. Own it. Stop dreaming and live it.' "

PREVIEW

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

The company performs two programs. Both end with Ailey's most famous work -- "Revelations," based on spirituals. The other works:

• 8 p.m. Friday and 3 p.m. next Sunday: "The Firebird" by Maurice Bejart "reinterprets the traditional fairy tale as an allegory of revolution, idealism and rebirth," the company says. The music is the Igor Stravinsky classic. Twyla Tharp's "The Golden Section" is an athletic showpiece for seven men and six women, based on music by David Byrne.

• 8 p.m. Saturday: In Ulysses Dove's "Episodes," five men and four women "seem shot out of a cannon," according to a review of the company's first performance of it. Ailey's "Flowers," premiered in 1971, was inspired by the life of rock 'n' roll icon Janis Joplin. The work, the company says, is a "dramatic chronicle of one woman's rise and fall as well as a timely statement on voyeurism and the price of fame."

WHERE: Belk Theater, Blumenthal Performing Arts Center, 130 N. Tryon St.

TICKETS: \$15-\$59.

DETAILS: 704-372-1000; www.blumenthalcenter.org.