

A young dancer, poised for success

Constance Stamatiou is living her dream as a dancer with Ailey II

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When Constance Stamatiou was a little girl in Charlotte, NC., she happened to see a PBS special of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performing "Revelations." She remembers being completely captivated by Ailey's iconic modern-dance tale of growing up African-American in Texas, with its fan-waving church-goers, traditional spiritual music and striking tableaux.

"I knew then that I wanted to dance for Ailey," she says.

Now 22, Stamatiou glows with the excitement of someone watching her childhood dream unfold. She currently dances with Ailey II, a stepping-stone company Ailey created in 1974 as a way to give talented young dancers professional experience that will help them blossom into artists.

Ailey II is currently performing an unprecedented two-week season in New York, christening the Ailey Citigroup Theater, a 255-seat theater inside the larger Ailey organization's gleaming Joan Weill Center for Dance on W. 55th St. The largest dance facility in the U.S., the Weill Center serves as Alvin Ailey's headquarters, housing offices and an ample number of dance studios.

The Center opened its doors in 2005, but is just beginning to work to capacity, with a full roster of dance classes for the general public (a hip-hop class was featured on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" last week), a First Steps program for the littlest dancers, and several programs for aspiring professionals, including a BFA with Fordham University. Ailey II's current season marks the first use of the building's theater by a resident company, and Ailey II is very proud to be performing in the organization's home.

Squeezing in an interview between a full afternoon of rehearsals and the pre-performance physical therapy that apparently even young, extremely able-bodied dancers can't go without, Stamatiou still sparkles with the energy that led her mother to enroll her in dance classes as a child. She took tap, jazz, ballet and gymnastics, and later attended a magnet high school for the performing arts in Charlotte.

When it came time for college, Stamatiou chose SUNY Purchase, well known for its dance program. After a year, a teacher led her to the Ailey school, where she continued her dance training full-time after being offered a fellowship. Stamatiou spent roughly two years in the fellowship program before being asked to join Ailey II, which accepts new dancers by invitation only - as opposed to auditions. The company maintains a roster of 6 boys and 6 girls, plus a few apprentices who serve as understudies. The current troupe's dancers come from as far away as Berlin and French Guiana, and range in age from 20 to 24.

Prior to their New York season, which began April 11, the company had just finished up an eight-week tour that took them to 45 cities, an ambitious schedule that gives the dancers invaluable experience. Stamatiou recalls a performance of "Quintet," a piece Ailey choreographed in 1968 about a Supremes-like singing group. Toward the end, the dancers' placement on the stage went wrong. "One girl cut in front of me and we tripped," Stamatiou recalled. "And we have on these high heels, too." Stamatiou stayed in character as the group's diva and threw a little temper tantrum on the floor before getting back on her feet to strike the dance's final pose. "That was probably my most embarrassing moment," she says. "But it was a good recovery."

On stage, Stamatiou sheds the charmingly fidgety girlish energy that sometimes bubbles to the surface when she's speaking. In "Splendid Isolation II," she gives an emotionally charged performance in a dance where she holds center stage both literally and figuratively. Draped in a white gown that is as much set piece as costume, she begins the dance as a statuesque figure who then fleetingly falls to earth - only to tragically disappear again. The piece shows the payoff from her years with Ailey II. On a less-assured dancer, the gown might be overwhelming, a distraction, but she brings both the costume and her role to life with the graceful power of her movement and the steadiness of her considerable stage presence.



Constance Stamatiou had known since age 6 that she wanted to dance with Alvin Ailey. She's currently performing in New York with Ailey II.

Because Ailey II is designed as a preparatory company for fledgling dancers, there comes a moment when they need to be thrust into the professional world. For most of them, their time with the company is limited to two years (although Tyrell V. Rolle, a standout current member, just completed his third).

By that measure, Stamatiou's time with Ailey II is just about up. "Of course my ultimate dream is first company," she says of her plans, looking ahead to the end next month of what is likely her final season with Ailey II. "But I'm definitely looking into Broadway, I'm looking into teaching, choreographing, and maybe opening my own company up."

Stamatiou won't have to wait very long to find out if her dream of dancing with Alvin Ailey will continue uninterrupted.

Auditions for the main company are coming up the day after Ailey II's current home season ends.

"Maybe, hopefully, some of us will get lucky," she says.

Though 20 of the 31 main Ailey dancers came up through Ailey II, there are no guarantees. In the last two years, two junior dancers have joined the first troupe, and many of those who've made the leap had to audition several times before being selected.

If Stamatiou doesn't make the first company this time around, she doesn't plan on straying very far. "I'm most definitely staying in New York," she says. Her love for the city comes out when she describes rehearsing in the Weill Center.

"Especially when we're here until it gets dark, you see the lights of the buildings. It's really beautiful. It gives you more energy, to dance better."

While Stamatiou clearly loves being on stage and will likely continue to perform, whether it's with the main Ailey troupe or another company, she also enjoys another aspect of Ailey II's work: teaching. The group goes to schools across the five boroughs, exposing kids to dance as a form of creative and artistic expression. Students who participate also come and see the company perform, so they can witness the ultimate fruition of what they're experiencing in the classroom. Ailey II also teaches classes while they're on tour, and the broader Ailey organization had dance camps especially for kids at risk of dropping out of school, where they receive intensive dance training as well as counseling. A new branch is opening on Staten Island this year.

"Like Ailey said - and we stand by it to this day, dance came from the people, and we want to give it back to the people," Stamatiou says.

"And," she adds, on another note and with a big smile, "we're Ailey II, but we're not second-rate. We stand by that as well."

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*Ailey II's performance at the Ailey Citigroup Theater quickly sold out for its entire run, **but due to popular demand a new performance has just been added, Sunday, April 22 at 7:30 pm.** The Joan Weill Center for Dance, 405 W. 55th St. (at Ninth Avenue). Tickets are \$40. Visit www.alvinailey.org for more information, or call 212-868-4444 to purchase tickets. Ailey II will also perform at the Apollo Theater, along with the main Ailey company and students from the Ailey school, as part of the annual Spring Gala fund-raiser, May 10, at the Apollo Theater, 253, W. 125th St. For ticket information call 212-405-9031.*