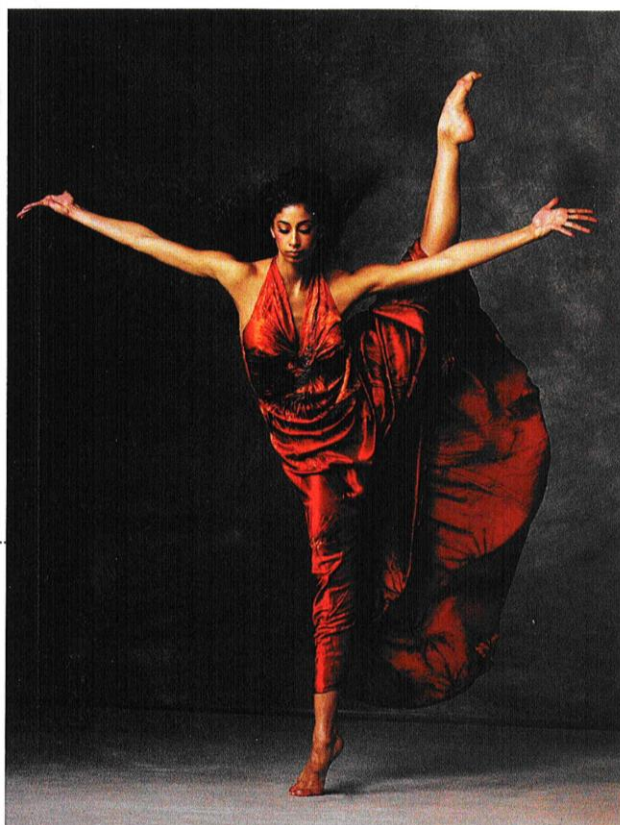




fromtheheart | WHY I DANCE



by Alicia Graf

A one-time principal dancer with Dance Theatre of Harlem, Alicia Graf attracted attention the minute she joined Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 2005. With her extra long gorgeous legs, vulnerable face, and mass of curls, she is a presence onstage you don't easily forget (see cover story, Dec. 06). Plus, she infuses each of her roles with heart and soul. A graduate of Columbia University, Graf has written for Dance Magazine and other publications.

Why do I dance? If I could take a guess, I would simply say that God designed my body to move. I can't sit still for more than 10 minutes. I can't read and listen to music at the same time because my mind starts choreographing. Even now, as I try to find the words to type, my leg is bouncing incessantly to some internal rhythm. There was a point in my life when I tried to leave dance behind, reconfigure my design. I failed miserably. So I realize that whatever I may do in my life, I will always be a dancer. My purpose is to move.

By the time I was 3 or 4 years old, I already considered myself an artist—not a technician or entertainer. Can you imagine? I wanted to be a performer who could make an audience cry. My mother, a woman of many talents, taught me about tension and texture before I even knew how to pirouette. She would show me how to hold a tight fist and make it shake to show anger, or how to flutter my fingers to evoke happiness. My dad, the most selfless man I know, influenced my approach as early as I can remember. My little sister is also a dancer. We grew up together in the studio. This is where I come from.

I have always taken this gift very seriously—maybe a little too seriously. I remember as a teenager forcing myself to perfectly execute eight 64-count developpés in every direction every night before bed to strengthen my legs. I slept in splits. I wanted my body to be the perfect instrument.

And now, at age 29, I understand that my body will never be perfect. And I like it that way. I have never been a conventional person, or a conventional dancer, so why start trying now? The stage is where my sometimes awkward social ways and my desire to affect people are advantages. The stage is my platform for transformation. I move my body and in turn, I move the hearts of people without so much as a word. I love my job.

Dance is by far the most challenging profession on the planet. Dancers live out of suitcases away from their loved ones. We put our bodies through insane amounts of stretching, pulling, strengthening, and stress just to achieve a desired line or to simply get through a performance day. Staring at our images in ceiling-high mirrors for days at a time, our self-esteem is constantly challenged. Most of our hours are spent in dark, cold, concrete boxes called theaters. But baby, when the curtain rises, and those lights start shining, something deep inside is ignited. We create our own cosmos of joy and inspiration.

After 10 years of being a professional dancer I still think it's crazy that this is how I make my living. It is my job to show up at a theater on time, but my privilege to perform. While I am paid to execute steps, my true reward lies in the act of conversation through movement. Movement is how I speak. This is how I express myself to an audience and to my Creator, always giving thanks for life and the many stories I can share through this art form. Dancing, although for show, is a humble craft. I am constantly reminded that I am more than myself. I am Alvin Ailey and Judith Jamison; I am Arthur Mitchell and Virginia Johnson; I am Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson. I am the present and the future of this legacy. Collectively we evolve—creatures of movement. ■