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**QUICK Q&A**

Alicia Graf Mack

The striking Ailey star returns to the company.



For a dancer who seems to have all of the natural facility in the world, Alicia Graf Mack has had a surprisingly difficult career. She spent three years as a Dance Theatre of Harlem ballerina, until she was sidelined by injury. She then attended Columbia University and six years later found her way back to the stage, joining Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 2005 (see cover story, Dec. 2006). Following Ailey's 2008 international tour, she announced she was leaving the company—and possibly the stage—for good. Now she has rejoined Ailey, having just returned from the company's summer tour abroad. She talked to associate editor Kina Poon about why she felt she had to give up dance, how she couldn't stay away, and what's changed for her as a dancer.

It felt like you vanished overnight. What happened in July of 2008?

I have an autoimmune disorder, an arthritis disease. So in 2008 when we finished our international tour, my joints were really inflamed. I even had inflammation inside of my eye. And then I started feeling pain in my right knee. I had an MRI and it showed a very small tear. When I got that news, I was really overwhelmed.

You've had problems with your knees before?

I had already had two knee surgeries, and the thought of worsening the tear and having another surgery was terrifying. The last time that all this happened, I was with Dance Theatre of Harlem, and I tried to push through it and do physical therapy and have surgery right away. It took four years just to get back to regular shape. It was the most depressing part of my life.

So you decided to take a break? I moved to St. Louis with the love of my life and I enrolled in a master's degree program at Washington University to study nonprofit management. And I was teaching dance to high school students at a school called Center of Creative Arts.

Did you always want to teach? I had no ambition to be a teacher, but I really fell in love with the students and with teaching. Being in the studio was my saving grace at the time. Then I got a one-year, visiting professorship at Webster University in St. Louis. I taught ballet and Horton and a comp class.

How was your arthritis at that point? I went to an alternative medicine doctor who did a full allergy test and found

that I have food sensitivities to gluten and dairy. She said, "If you take those things out of your diet, you're going to see a lot of improvement in your body." After about six months, I was able to taper off my medication. I'm now on the lowest dosage that you can take. It was like getting my life back again.

What about your knee? I could still feel the pain and it even hurt to teach, so I decided to have the surgery. Within a week after the surgery, I felt great. I did physical therapy and I was like, "Man, if I had known that it would heal this fast..." I started taking classes. Word travels and I ended up getting some guesting gigs. That kind of refueled my passion for dancing.

How did you get back in touch with Ailey? Masazumi Chaya had asked me to come back and perform—Ms. Jamison didn't know, because it was a surprise—for her tribute night at City Center, the last show in January. I really worked to get myself together because I didn't want to look, you know, crazy. In the performance, I felt so free onstage. I thought I would be crazy nervous—but it just felt like where I belonged.

Was it hard to leave your life in St. Louis? I got married this past year and I didn't want to be selfish and turn our whole world upside down. My husband, Kirby, told me, "You're meant to do this, and if it's what you want to do, I'll support you wholeheartedly." So Kirby now lives in Maryland, back in my hometown—which is also crazy. And I live here in New York, and we commute on the weekends. ▶▶



Alicia Graf Mack in John Butler's Portrait of Billie

▶▶ **What was your first week of rehearsals like?** It was a whirlwind. Luckily that week was just all the new dancers, which was nice, because we could form a bond together as the new crop coming up. I guess I'm semi-new, but I feel new. We learned—and I refreshed—the staple pieces of *Revelations* and *Night Creature*, which you learn as a rookie. It was intense, but I enjoyed every moment. Robert Battle, the incoming artistic director, is so personable. At the first rehearsal, he was like, "So how do you feel?" And I was like, "Actually, I feel like I never left."

And at that point, Ms. Jamison was spending her last month with the company too. What was the atmosphere in the studios? I think that everybody was very happy for her and also excited for something new and fresh. I think that Robert's doing an amazing job.

What's the biggest thing you've taken away from the last three years? I now realize, and this has given me great peace of mind, that my life was designed to be in the dance world. I kind of questioned that every time I was injured. I was trying to do something else: banking, marketing, nonprofit management. But I realize my calling is to be onstage or in the studio. ■

Left: Stephanie Berger, Courtesy NYLA. Right: Eduardo Pardo, Courtesy AAADT

Left: Jacques-Léon Tébou, Courtesy P.A. Right: Eduardo Pardo, Courtesy AAADT