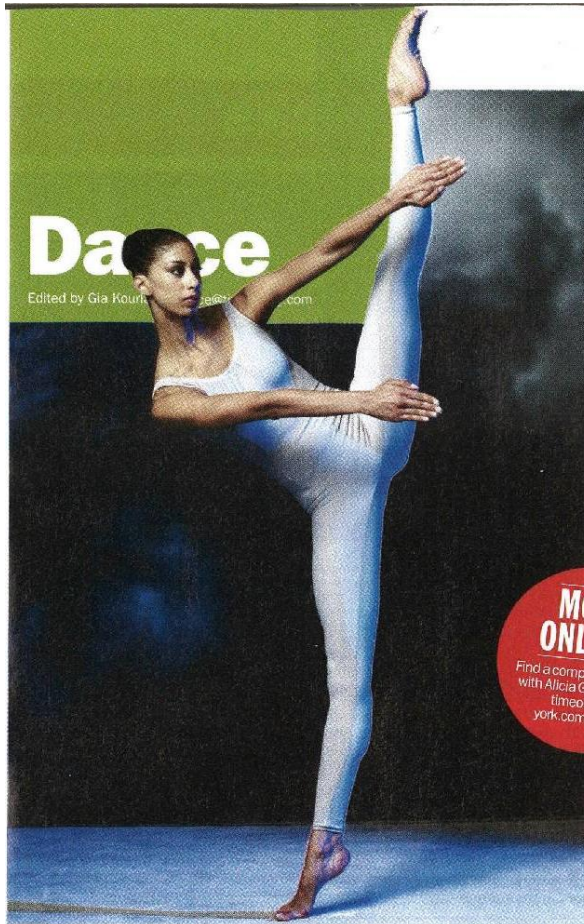
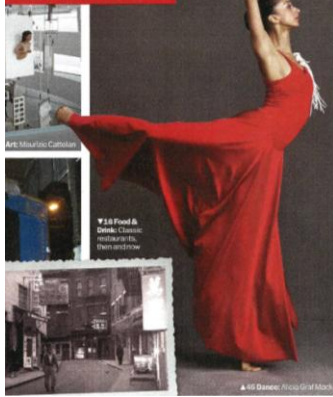




Dance

Edited by Gia Kourlas

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surgery. But when I found out I had a tear, I just couldn't handle any more body issues. So with tears in my eyes, I had to tell Ms. [Judith] Jamison that I wasn't coming back.

Part of what you've been doing is teaching dance in St. Louis. Did that make you ultra aware of your own dancing?

Definitely. That's what brought me back to dancing. I was so wanting to give them a great experience that it brought me back to all the things that I love about dancing. I pushed them. All of those things that you say to inspire someone? I was talking to myself.

And how did you return?

I started taking class if I had an hour or two off. Of course, word started getting around, "Alicia's taking class..."

[Laughs] And then I started getting little gigs here and there. [Ailey associate artistic director Masazumi] Chaya called me. He was getting ready to put together the tribute-night performance for Ms. Jamison. I was really nervous, but at the same time there was this odd sense of peace and calmness that I had never experienced as a performer. Something about that experience made me realize that this is what I'm made to do, and if my body is working properly, then I should do this. To step away from dance because of pain or discomfort... the discomfort of *not* doing what you're meant to do is equally as painful.

Do you feel like you're dancing differently?

I do. Of course, technically I want to be proficient, but I think that there are other things that are much more important to me now, like having a sense of freedom on the stage. Because I wanted to be so perfect, sometimes I felt confined by the movement. I'm striving to let the movement be freeing. I want to develop into the type of artist that I've seen many people who have longevity in their careers become, and I find that the way that they move—I want to be like that. Matthew Rushing is one of those people. He's spirit personified and every time you see him, it's as if he stepped on the stage for the first time. Carmen de Lavallade is [my] No. 1 idol. Even now, she is more beautiful than most dancers.

She is more beautiful than most of the world.

I look and say, "Now what is that? What is that *thing*?" It's very intangible. What a blessing for me to be able to learn to tap into that. I don't feel like I have a lot to prove. When you're younger, you feel like you have to show that you're worthy, and now I just want to share. That's really all.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is at New York City Center Wed 30–Jan 1.

Alicia Graf Mack

The gift that keeps on giving is back at Ailey.
By Gia Kourlas

When Alicia Graf Mack left Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 2008, it seemed that her dancing career was finished—among other things, she suffers from an autoimmune disorder classified as reactive arthritis, which, at the time, led to swelling and pain in her joints. (She had experienced it all before as a brilliant member of Dance Theatre of Harlem in the late '90s.) Mack joined her husband in St. Louis and, while pursuing her master's in nonprofit management, began teaching dance, first at the Center of Creative Arts and then at Webster University, where she served as a visiting assistant professor of dance. What happens when you start teaching? You start dancing again. Mack, 32 and one of the most glorious dancers to step onto any stage, is back, and we're all the better for it.

What is your autoimmune disorder all about?

It's in the family of spondyloarthropathy, but it's never shown up in my blood, so we have

never been able to classify exactly what type of arthritis or autoimmune disorder I have. The symptoms are like reactive arthritis. I also have the disease in my eye.

You're kidding!

[Shakes head] So 2008 was really hard because I had to take a lot of medication in my eye, which made everything really blurry. And it's given me cataracts, so everything is still a little blurry. It was a lot to handle. Since I left Dance Theatre of Harlem, I had managed it pretty successfully, but that year it blew out of control.

Do you know why?

It's one of these things: It can go into remission with medication, and because it's an autoimmune disorder, anything can trigger it. It has nothing to do with the physicality of dancing. At the same time, I had a small tear in my knee, but it was the type of tear that I could have managed dancing with or I could have had a small