

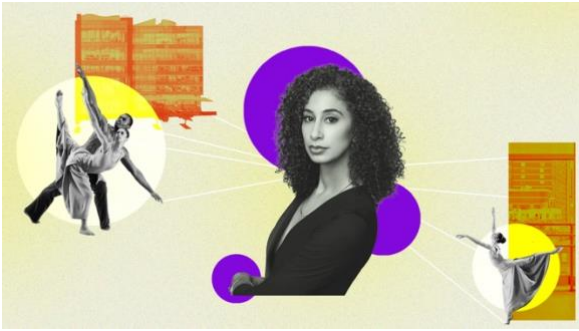
Inc.

How Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Presents a Master Class in Branding

Alicia Graf Mack, the iconic company's new artistic director, is all-in on meeting audiences where they are.

By: Mike Miller

December 11, 2025



Last week, for only the fourth time in its nearly 70-year history, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company began its new season under the leadership of a different Artistic Director: Alicia Graf Mack.

Prior to taking on this role, Graf Mack was the longstanding dean and director of the dance division at The Juilliard School. She had previously collaborated with musical artists such as Beyoncé, John Legend, and Jon Batiste. Before that, she had been a dancer—including a leading dancer—with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. That means she had been well-educated about the philosophies of the company's founder and first artistic director, in addition to having worked under the direct tutelage of both Judith Jamison and Robert Battle, the second and third artistic directors of Ailey. Her roots with the Ailey organization run deep.

In a short-term business world that tends to be focused only on the now, this appointment represents a rarer kind of thinking: It embraces continuity, and long-term thinking, as the best short-term strategy. As Graf Mack said it: "Working here is more than a job. It is part of who I am and what I believe in. So, I am not just here to fulfill my hours.... I am all-in."

Just ahead of the curtain rising on the new season, I had the opportunity to interview Graf Mack about the history she inherited, the future she is building, and the necessity of meeting audiences where they are to meaningfully advance a founder's dream for the next generation.

What are the origins of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company?

Alvin Ailey was a groundbreaking choreographer, performer and dancer. Larger than that, he was also a civil rights and social justice pioneer who utilized modern dance as a way to share human stories across the globe; holding up a mirror to society and showing people how beautiful they are. Mr. Ailey used his artistry to better our world: to bring us all closer together.

Classic ballet tended to celebrate high culture, elitism, fairy tales and princesses. It didn't always connect to the everyday person. Modern dance was a reorientation, or even a rejection, of the norms of classical ballet. Mr. Ailey once famously said, "Dance came from the people and should always be delivered back to the people."

In turn, his work was influenced by the social vernacular of our culture. It reflected some of the social dancing you would find at a speakeasy, or "in the club" as we call it now. It integrated some of the dance you would see on the streets, including jazz dancing which came from various assimilations of African dance and rhythms. It included the way people dance to the blues, and how they dance when they feel the holy ghost or even a sense of spirituality. Mr. Ailey brought the beauty and joy of how real people liked to move to the stage—so that more people could see it, feel it, and receive it back.



New York City is the home of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. But even when we travel abroad, to destinations where we may not share the same language, religion or race—there remains something very powerful about the Ailey aesthetic and Ailey spirit that touches and connects us all. Celebrating our common humanity is central to the ethos of what Mr. Ailey created starting in 1958.



As the newly appointed artistic director, how do you make sure the storied Ailey brand stays vital?

There are some foundational underpinnings of this organization that should never change. Mr. Ailey was entrepreneurial in spirit. He found ways to make dance inclusive to all. He found ways to share the most difficult parts of who we are as people on stage without making audiences feel like they did not want to be there. There is always a resolution, faith and hope, at the end of the experience. When people spend money to come to the theater, he wanted them to leave feeling uplifted. These things will never change.

When Judith Jamison took over as artistic director in 1989, she not only carried on these traditions, but she added operational excellence. She took the company that acted like a small business and evolved it to a large, visible brand. She played a key role in securing an endowment for the now permanent home for the company in the biggest building dedicated to dance in New York City, and one of the biggest in the world. She increased the strength of the Ailey name by adding power and presence to beauty and truth. I was lucky to have worked under her as a dancer.

Robert Battle took over in 2011. He also maintained traditions, but he added to them too. He stretched the repertoire to include other ideas. So, I got to do all the Ailey rep, plus I performed repertory by Ron Brown which is African-infused dance. I performed work by Rennie Harris which is hip-hop-influenced. I performed Ohad Naharin's work from Israel, and Jiří Kylián's work from the Netherlands. All the dancers at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater are amongst the best in the world, and Mr. Battle gave us the chance to perform from across the best work in the world.

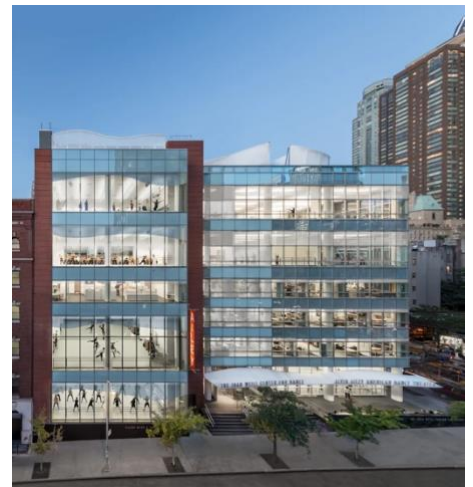
This year, I returned to the company as its artistic director. I have a regard for its history. I have a strong sense of its future too. I will nurture what Mr. Ailey, Ms. Jamison and Mr. Battle created. Like the others, I believe stretching is also an important part of growing. Including stretching to meet people where they are living today. We have to better learn how to reach people through social media. We have to tap into streaming media. We have to create collaborations across industries, like music collaborations, to reach more people too. We have to think beyond the stage because the touring model has limitations.

We do not need to change the blueprint, but we need to make sure the blueprint fits the day.

For readers who are newer to the Ailey brand, what is the company's signature work?

The signature piece of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is *Revelations*. If you're new to dance, and if you've never seen any live performance, it's the thing you should see first. *Revelations* will help people to understand how Mr. Ailey was so successful in telling a very specific story in a way that connects us all.

Revelations is a story in three sections. The first section, "Pilgrim of Sorrow," is about coming up from the ground and growing through the struggle. Symbolically, it communicates that even when you continue to be pulled down, there is always hope and faith to look toward. The next section, "Take Me to the Water," is about rebirth. The final section, "Move, Members, Move!" is all about joy and celebration. Celebrating our humanity, celebrating our



connection, and celebrating the resilience of the human spirit. *Revelations* is an autobiographical story about Mr. Ailey's life, but also a universal story that takes audiences through the entire journey we go through as people in the world.



The traditional *Swan Lake* ballet—which has its beauty—is more ethereal and mystical. In contrast, Mr. Ailey's modern *Revelations* feels more real; grounded in genuine human experiences. *Revelations* is the most perfect work of art. No matter what language you speak, or what background you come from, you will feel touched by it. It is not only institution-defining work, but also culturally defining work.

In today's society, driven by high technology, where do the arts and humanities fit in?

I was a history major in college. I have long been interested in humanities, and how history, culture and art are all intertwined. I learned that to really understand a period of time, you should look to the world of the arts—like fashion, literature and, of course, dance.

Recently, the Whitney Museum of American Art curated an exhibit, called “Edges of Ailey,” exploring the breadth and context of Mr. Ailey's work. As an observer, you got a genuine sense of how brave it was for Mr. Ailey to highlight underrepresented stories on stage—especially Black stories—and to share them so authentically during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. His work was so rich and enduring because the stories he told were so urgent, and the way he told them was so truthful.

Sadly, in 2025, some of the social tension he worked so hard to diminish has returned. The idea of celebrating identity and diversity in all its forms is being discouraged. The bravery and strength that Mr. Ailey displayed back then is what we hold onto in our art now. When people come see the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and see us continue to highlight underrepresented stories, it is common to hear them say, “Thank you. I needed to see that, because otherwise it feels like our humanity is disappearing right in front of us.”

Ailey dancers remain aware that they are cultural ambassadors, and in these complicated times, the role of artists to bring beauty and hope is even more important.

What advice do you have for other leaders working to advance a founder's dream?

I think you have to feel personally connected to the history and future of where an organization is going. It cannot simply be about stepping into a nine to five job. You have to be all in.

There are a lot of sacrifices that being an Artistic Director, and an artist, demands. Being part of the Ailey company requires a lot of touring. It requires sacrificing time with family and, often, the ability to stay in the comfort of your own home. Not only is it a commitment of time, but it is also a physical and spiritual commitment too. My family supports the sacrifices because they know what this means to me.

When I was somewhere around eight years old, a friend who loved dance showed me a VHS tape of an Ailey performance. The choreography featured Donna Wood performing “Cry,” which Mr. Ailey created as a present for his mother. I remember how that performance made me feel. I recognized that I loved dance because it could make me feel like that and that, in turn, I could help others to feel like that too. Dance was a superpower. I was hooked. I have loved this company and institution of dance ever since.

Working here is more than a job. It is part of who I am and what I believe in. So, I am not just here to fulfill my hours. I pour every bit of who I am as a person and as an artist into this work. I feel full and blessed to be in this position. I am all-in.

