

VOGUE

The Curtain Rises for Alicia Graf Mack, Ailey's New Artistic Director

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On a recent Monday evening at the Manhattan headquarters of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, rehearsal for *Revelations* had the camaraderie of a reunion. A drum set rumbled in the corner. Vocalists settled into their chairs, sheet music and iPads in hand. The late choreographer's canonical 1960 work, set to song-sermons and gospel, is typically performed with live music at the start of the company's annual residency at New York City Center, and the artists were finally back in one room to prepare for opening night on December 3. The musical director cued the spiritual "Wade in the Water"—an evocation of Ailey's boyhood baptism in a church pond in rural Texas—and the dancers began a procession with undulating torsos. "Rocka My Soul" brought out a flurry of yellow rattan fans, in homage to humid

Sunday services, which sent a palpable breeze to the observers seated in front-row folding chairs.

Alicia Graf Mack, Ailey's newly appointed artistic director and a twice-former company member, stepped in during a lull to demonstrate the easy fluidity of a head movement. However high the pressure may be for her debut season, Graf Mack, in serendipitous ways, has spent her life preparing for this moment—from her first job at 17 with Dance Theatre of Harlem to her seven-year post directing Juilliard's dance division. The piano trilled, and a soloist began to sing, as if channeling the inner monologue of someone taking the helm of an internationally beloved institution: "I wanna be ready, Lord."

Graf Mack, a statuesque 46-year-old mother of two, joined Ailey in July as only its fourth artistic director in history. The founder himself led the company from its debut in 1958 until his death of AIDS-related complications in 1989. His handpicked successor was Judith Jamison, a magisterial dancer with the troupe from 1965 to 1980, who went on to shape Ailey into an indisputable household name; she choreographed frequently for the company and spearheaded the campaign to build its six-story permanent home on 55th Street and Ninth Avenue. In 2011, Jamison took on an emerita role and handed the reins to Robert Battle, who expanded the roster of dancemakers during his 12-year tenure.



Now, the corner office belongs to Graf Mack. She has brought along her framed *Revelations* fan, a memento from her performing days. And she has made space for a colorful patchwork chaise longue that belonged to Ms. Jamison, who died last fall at age 81. "I would never call her Judi—it would sound odd coming out of my mouth," says Graf Mack, who had a poster of Jamison in her childhood bedroom. Theirs was a relationship of mutual respect, one artist to another: "'You're a divine spirit walker,' she would text me sometimes."

In many ways, Graf Mack's appointment in November 2024, just weeks after Jamison's death, felt ordained. Once again, the company would be guided by a five-foot-ten woman who captivated audiences on the Ailey stage. (A poster from the 2012-2013 season featuring Graf Mack—one leg up in a side-split jump, with a beyond-180-degree extension—no doubt earned a place in a younger generation's bedrooms.) Like Jamison, Graf Mack had carried the parasol in *Revelations*, a role reserved for a matriarchal figure. And it's an apt metaphor, the umbrella, considering everything Ailey-related that falls under her purview. There's the bonafide company and Ailey II, for early-career dancers;

the Ailey School for pre-professional training and a BFA program with Fordham; Ailey Extension classes for the broader community, plus AileyCamp's summer programs around the country for middle schoolers from underserved communities.

"This organization feels rooted in an individual's big dream for art and what it can do," Graf Mack says of Alvin Ailey's extraordinary vision, which honored personal identity and shared experience. As interpreters, Graf Mack shares Jamison's audacious streak, as the rehearsal director Ronni Favors, who arrived at Ailey as a student in 1974, puts it. "They're not afraid to dream big and shoot high, even if their affect is different." She remembers Jamison likening her dancers to B52 bombers—her apartment overlooked the Intrepid, so she'd watch the airplanes come and go with hurtling might—while Graf Mack embodies a knowing reserve.

"The thing that drives everything we do," Favors adds, "is Mr. Ailey's beautiful quote. He said, 'I believe that dance came from the people and that it should always be delivered back to the people.'" Now, with Graf Mack leading the way, the collective goal deepens: "How many different ways can we make good on that promise?"



Graf Mack's own dance life began when she was tiny. Her mother, a Howard professor who also ran a community modeling school in Columbia, Maryland, would tote her along to evening courses; a young Graf Mack, with her coltish long limbs, was soon invited into the neighboring dance class. Ballet became her north star, with rigorous training consuming her free time. "Growing up biracial—just trying to figure out, Who am I and how do I navigate this world?—I had all these images of dancers of color on my walls," she says. When Ailey toured through town, she'd catch them at the Kennedy Center and Baltimore's Lyric Opera House.

At 11, she took a master class with Dance Theatre of Harlem—founded by Arthur Mitchell, the first Black principal at New York City Ballet and a noted protégé of George Balanchine—and the principal dancer Donald Williams signed her shoes with a prophetic note: "Hope to see you at DTH one day." Six years later, she joined the company. Rare as it is to see a woman standing six-foot-four in pointe shoes, Mr. Mitchell never saw Graf Mack's height as disqualifying. "He said, 'We have lots of tall partners for you here,'" she once told PBS. "I never had to fight to feel a sense of belonging. I only had to do the thing that I was hired to do."

A career that began with ease didn't continue that way; injuries related to an underlying rheumatoid condition sidelined Graf Mack after just three years. She studied at Columbia University as a history major, slipping into dance classes at the studio Steps. There, she began taking Horton technique—a reprieve from ballet—with Milton Myers, then a teacher with Ailey. He suggested she meet with Jamison and arranged for her to take class with the company when the tour overlapped with her spring break. "For me, it was like being a tourist," says Graf Mack, who relished the chance to meet an idol but already had a job at JP Morgan lined up for the fall. She spent that summer filling in with the contemporary ballet company Complexions, when the dance legend Carmen de Lavallade—a high school friend of Ailey's, credited with introducing him to Lester Horton's studio in the 1940s—took her aside. The bank job? "You can do that at any time in your life," Graf Mack remembers her saying. "But it's clear that you are born to do this and your body is telling you that you can, so you should."

"There have been all these—I call them angels—to point me forward, and they've all been Ailey people," Graf Mack says. She took the advice and rejoined Dance





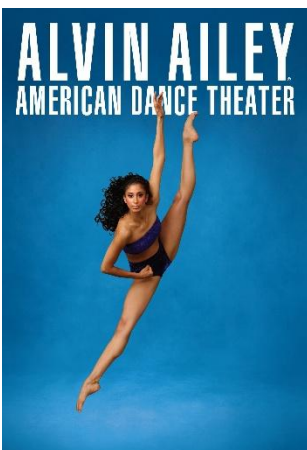
Theatre of Harlem as a principal, though the company shuttered after a year due to financial instability. In 2005, she finally auditioned for Ailey, dancing for three years before injury again crept in. Academia beckoned: She got a master's degree in nonprofit management and began life as a professor. Then, as Jamison was preparing for retirement, she invited Graf Mack and Jamar Roberts to reprise *A Case of You*, her 2004 duet that imagines a couple caught in the sometimes jagged, sometimes tender cycle of love. Robert Battle, the newly named artistic director, convinced Graf Mack to come back for what would be another three-year run—"this time married," she recalls. "Life happens in between."

It isn't always apparent how the sum of one's pursuits will eventually coalesce. In this case, the final piece of this preparatory puzzle was Graf Mack's 2018 appointment as dean and director of Juilliard's dance division. This was a role that demanded institutional savvy and in-the-classroom nuance; she helped with fundraising, tapped visiting choreographers, reframed history courses. As a Black woman with a long performing career, she understood the evolving landscape for working artists. With shrinking numbers of tentpole companies, graduates would need stylistic versatility, with training across a breadth of disciplines; new composition requirements helped prepare dancers to work with choreographers who increasingly build off in-studio improvisations. Old gender norms with ballet went away, allowing students to choose between pointe or allegro tracks. New media courses presaged the shift that would soon come during COVID. Graf Mack's conception of diversity as a thriving ecosystem was all-encompassing—both a reflection of the world as it is and an aspiration for how it could be.



Graf Mack's appointment at Ailey comes at a moment of cross-currents. The recent "Edges of Ailey" exhibition at the Whitney Museum—a monumental, moving project that centered on the impact and influences of the man himself—has recontextualized that household name for new audiences. The show's accompanying performance series, which tapped dancemakers across eras and backgrounds, also underscored Ailey's original big-tent vision. "He didn't want just a company for his own work, but a repertory company to give a platform for other artists to share their stories," says Graf Mack.

At the same time, Ailey's core principles—honoring identity alongside aesthetic achievement—face a shift in political winds. For its Washington, D.C. season early next year, the company will have its two-week run at the historic Warner Theatre, quietly closing a long chapter at the Kennedy Center. Graf Mack has seen the upheaval play out across higher education and arts organizations; she and the Ailey leadership are proceeding with care and integrity. "We follow the founding tenets and then we allow [Mr. Ailey's] bravery to keep us going into the future," she says. Here was a queer Black man barrelling bare-chested into the cultural firmament. "He very much put our stories at the forefront, even when that might not have been widely accepted, but his genius is that he did it in a way that made audience members see themselves onstage, whoever they were, from any background, identity, place around the world."



Highlights on the City Center program reflect this effort to simultaneously root into tradition and break new ground. Maija García's *Jazz Island*, with an original score by the trumpeter and composer Etienne Charles, is a narrative exploration of Afro-Caribbean folklore created for the full company. García took inspiration from the book *Black Gods, Green Islands*, by the late Trinidadian artist and dancer Geoffrey Holder; his longtime partner, Carmen de Lavallade—one of those "angels" that helped steer the artistic director back toward dance—called it "a very good meal" after a recent preview.

Graf Mack sees *Jazz Island* in the tradition of Ailey's first work, *Blues Suite* (1958)—each dancer embodying a distinct character—while the company premiere of *Blink of an Eye* is a coolly contemporary addition. Choreographed by Medhi Walerski for eight dancers, it was originally created for Nederlands Dans Theater. "It's not built in the Black aesthetic or cultural narrative

language,” she says. What makes it Ailey is the “amazing dancing with so much heart and daring.” During a rehearsal, Graf Mack let out a yelp when a petite dancer leapt a rather far distance into a pair of waiting arms—an illustration of risk and reward.

For the opening night performance, the Grammy-decorated violinist Melissa White will play for *Blink of an Eye* and the powerhouse vocalist Samara Joy—with five Grammys at just 26, Graf Mack points out—will accompany the newly revived *A Case of You*, in place of Diana Krall’s rendition of the Joni Mitchell track. But the first glimpse of the new season arrived ahead of schedule, for the audience Ailey always imagined. On the Friday evening before Thanksgiving, the company’s rehearsal for *Revelations* took place in the street-level studio. They opened the shades and piped the music out onto the sidewalk, like a Ninth Avenue take on the holiday windows. “It’s amazing to practice these gifts,” Graf Mack says, but “the mission is to give dance back to the people.”

