

Alicia Graf, Rising to a Greater Height

After an Injury, the Trouper Is Putting a New Face on Dance

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By Lonnae Parker O'Neal

Some of the best advice dancer Alicia Graf ever got came from her mother: Since you're tall, you'll always stand out, so you might as well be glorious. Maybe that's why at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performances at the Kennedy Center this week, Graf leaps and turns and extends her legs so high it's as if she's trying to play footsy with God.

In conversation, the Columbia native is so soft-spoken she still can seem like that innocent 17-year-old who made such a splash on the New York dance scene a decade ago. But while the critical acclaim and attendant buzz about her have returned, this time around Graf just revels in the joy of motion.

Fame came early to Graf and left in a hurry. Now it's back. She turned 27 on Wednesday, and the curtain is up on her second act.

At rehearsal Tuesday afternoon, as Dwana Adiaha Smallwood instructed, Graf and fellow dancer Tina Monica Williams worked on their "fan hands" for a section of the company's 46-year-old signature piece, "Revelations." In practice, even in sweats, Graf is all legs and lines, and she moves with graceful economy. The signature role of "center woman" used to be danced by Ailey's legendary artistic director, Judith Jamison, a majestic performer who, like Graf, stands at just under six feet tall. Now, Graf is learning this role.

That center spot is not new to her. In 1996, Graf moved to New York and joined the Dance Theatre of Harlem. A year later, she was dancing lead roles. Acclaim followed. One critic said she rises on pointe "as if it were a moral imperative." In 1998, the New York Times dubbed her one of the year's most influential dancers. Then, searing pain. Stricken with a difficult-to-diagnose knee injury, not only could Graf not dance, she could barely walk. For a year, there were surgeries, rehab, tears.

It was an emotionally wrenching time. Dance was everything she knew, she says. "That's all I thought about." Finally, Graf decided she had to let go of dancing to keep her sanity. She decided to try the one move she had never done.

She got still.

She enrolled in the City College of New York, then Columbia University. Without the rigor of performances and the need to adhere to rehearsal schedules, she paid attention to the rhythm of her thoughts. "I didn't even know what my other interests were," says Graf. "It's the first time I had a chance to relax and be a kid." She had a boyfriend; she took classes in accounting, Spanish and gender in South America en route to a degree in history. She did summer internships at J.P. Morgan Chase financial company and in the fashion and beauty department of Essence magazine.

And, after the swelling from her reactive arthritis subsided, she put a foot back into dance. But not at the ballet barre. Along with other Columbia University students, none of them professional dancers, she started a "praise dancing" troupe, doing spiritual moves of uplift and celebration. At first, she tried being only artistic director. "I had this hang-up," Graf says. "I wanted to be around dance and dancers, but I don't think I trusted myself to try to be in it and not be in it 100 percent."

She was right. By her senior year, she was dancing again. After graduation in May 2003, Graf accepted a position at J.P. Morgan and planned to start that fall. But she decided she would spend one more summer dancing. After one of her performances, the legendary dancer Carmen de Lavallade took her aside. "You have something special. I really don't think you should try to do this banking thing," Graf recalls de Lavallade telling her.

Instead, she rejoined the Dance Theatre of Harlem as a principal dancer. After the company disbanded, she joined Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater last year. Once again, the accolades are piling up. "Graf's intuitive grace means she can do just about anything physically possible and make it look easy, natural and uncomplicated," wrote Post dance critic Sarah Kaufman of her performance Tuesday. (She dances again tonight and tomorrow.)

Coming back from injury, "it humbles you," says Graf. "It allows me to know that to be able to do this for a living is such a blessing." She doesn't worry that she might re-injure herself, she says. Instead, "I'm thanking God every day that I have this opportunity. Not many people have the opportunity to do something they love. From the time I was 3 years old I said I want to be a dancer."

Martha Graf, a former model who became a social work professor at Howard University, says her daughter was still in diapers when she started dancing. Martha Graf began a modeling school in 1993 housed in the same building as a dance studio. The instructor noticed little Alicia looking on and let her join the class. She and her husband, Arnie Graf, who works on housing issues for a local nonprofit organization, now live in Ellicott City, but Graf says her minivan used to be known around Columbia. She constantly ferried Alicia or her three siblings to soccer, basketball and dance in Howard County.

The dancing was all-consuming, and Martha Graf says she'd sometimes type parts of her daughter's school papers or get up with her during workouts at dawn. Alicia was "a whisper of a person when she was young," says her mother, who taught her to take up all her space.

Alicia Graf credits her home town for its diversity. Her father is white, and "my parents just wanted me to be comfortable" as a biracial child, she says. She was able to make friends with kids of different races and backgrounds. Even now, although she often splits time between New York and Atlanta, where her boyfriend, a financial analyst, lives, she returns home often. "I love Maryland," she says. "I'm definitely a suburban girl."

And, although naturally shy, the dancer knows "to be tall and shy is not attractive," so she's learned not to shrink. And she's learned to accept her role as role model.

Part of Alvin Ailey's preference was to feature dancers that ranged from the tiny and compact to the very tall and powerful. Graf is in a continuum of long and leggy Ailey powerhouses, beginning with Jamison and continuing with Donna Wood and April Berry. In her autobiography "Dancing Spirit," Jamison writes about a dance company that "really didn't know what to do with me. . . . What are you going to do with a five-foot-ten-inch female dancer, in any company?"

So Graf is well aware she is helping to put a different face on ballet. "I think a lot of things about me are unique. My height definitely sets me apart from other dancers. I have to work 10 times as hard because I'm going to be seen," she says. But she finds the Ailey mission of exposing young people to the brilliance of dancers of color a particularly rewarding part of her career.

"It's hard to dream about something if you don't have an image in your head," she says, "if you can't see yourself in the same position." An aunt who was a dance critic did that for her, sending her pictures of Dance Theatre of Harlem founder Arthur Mitchell and Ailey's Jamison.

"I think because dance is an art form, it's based off of somebody's imagination. If someone can't imagine a black dancer in a line of white dancers then it cuts off that line." But things are changing, she says, and the dance world is evolving and slowly, slowly, opening its doors to a larger range of faces and forms.

On Tuesday night, after the deft moves and impossible grace, after all the precision lifts and the standing ovations, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater relaxed at a gala dinner inside the Kennedy Center. Alicia Graf, tall, thin, lovely, glorious, hugged her dad, who reached out and caressed his daughter's face. "I'm happy for her because she's so happy," Arnie Graf says.

When she was a teenager, Alicia Graf couldn't imagine her life without dance. Now she refuses to waste time worrying that it'll be taken away again. She merely takes the stage and extends her legs beyond all imagination.

"Every time you go on the floor, dance as a way of thanking God for your gift," Martha Graf says she told her daughter.

And the glory of thank you is all Alicia Graf is thinking about for her second act.
