



Dancing star Alicia Graf Mack comes home to celebrate theatre's 30th

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By Janene Holzberg

On paper, there are a number of reasons why Alicia Graf Mack shouldn't be a successful dancer.

She's 6-foot-2 on her tiptoes, making it harder to find male partners tall enough for her. She's biracial, growing up in a time when African-American ballerinas are few. And she's suffered multiple injuries of the career-ending variety.

Yet the lead dancer of the world-famous Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre — who left for New York City in the middle of her senior year at Centennial High School to join the equally renowned Dance Theatre of Harlem — demonstrated last week why none of those things matter.

She returned to the county where she grew up to teach two master classes in modern dance on Oct. 19 at the Howard County Center for the Arts as part of the 30th anniversary celebration of one of her alma maters, the Ellicott City-based Kinetics Dance Theatre.

Mack is striking, with her cloud of dark curls and soulful brown eyes. She is even finer-boned in person than she appears in photos, where her lithe frame and long legs trick the eye into believing she must be larger and more muscular to execute such strong moves on stage.

In reality, the classically trained dancer wears pants in size double zero extra-extra long. Her petite frame masks physical power that is undeniable, and her performances draw exuberant praise from dance critics everywhere.

The Los Angeles Times recently described an Ailey performance as filled with "sculptural poses, uber-arched backs and entwined limbs," and singled out Mack as "mesmerizing." The New York Times labeled her "radiant" and marveled over a too-good-to-be-true poster that depicts her "as she floats in the air, her legs pointing in opposite directions."

"I've known since I was little that I was made to move," said Mack, now a youthful 34. "Even when I was reading or studying, I always had one leg bopping up and down.

"I run on physicality, and when I can't move, a part of me is not fully functioning," observed the dancer, who loves ballet, modern and jazz styles equally. "And I know I will be that way until I die."

She longed to become a professional dancer from a very young age and studied at Kinetics from ages 3 to 12. She then transferred to the Columbia-based Ballet Royale Institute of Maryland, where she trained under Donna Pidel for five years.

When she was invited to teach, she jumped at the chance to relive old memories and to visit her parents, Martha and Arnie Graf, who live in Ellicott City.

"I loved it here. It was a magical place and we really learned," she said.

Keith Nichols, who co-founded Kinetics in 1984 with Dottie Fried and Stephanie Simmons, sat in on the sessions. He recalled that when Mack was but 4 years old, she was "all determination."

"Alicia was born with too much energy," he said with a laugh. "But all of sudden, at a very young age, she became this really, really good dancer."

Her facility and talent were clearly on display on Saturday as she worked with dance students who, to their credit, kept up with her limber and fluid movements as she put them through several demanding routines.

Lauren Snyder, who is in her first season as Kinetic's new artistic director, was excited to have a dancer of Mack's caliber helping the studio mark an important milestone.

"It's so great that she's from this area and can be here with us to inspire younger dancers," she said.

'Know who you are'

Between classes Mack took questions from students and their parents on a brick patio in front of the arts center.

Eva Labuda, of Ellicott City, who had come to observe her 16-year-old daughter, Klaudia, as she danced in the first session, called Mack "an inspiration.

"I saw her perform at the Kennedy Center and you could see her passion," she said. "I am excited to see that she is as incredible as a person as she is a dancer."

Mack had just given her young fans advice based on her own experiences as a girl who was hyper-focused on dance.

"Multitask while you're doing your homework," she advised. "You can stretch while you study, but go be a normal kid. It's important to be well-rounded."

She told them that she earned a bachelor's degree in history at Columbia University, after an injury sidelined her the first time, and later got a master's degree in nonprofit management at Washington University of St. Louis.

Aside from telling the girls to get an education, she advised them to become versed in all kinds of dance styles and not to pigeonhole themselves.

"Know who you are," she said. "Don't compare yourself to others. Just say a prayer and lean on the gifts you have."

Anna Soukiassian, also of Ellicott City, inquired about a dancer's typical career length. She had come to the event with her daughter, Michelle Kassian-Howard, 12.

"That depends on so many variables, like style of dance and whether you're traveling," Mack replied. "I hope to dance till I'm 80 or 90," she said to much applause.

Thomara Speight offered Mack a compliment in lieu of a question, saying "You have great insight and such a positive spirit."

She had traveled an hour from Clinton, with her daughter, Naiya Speight-Leggett, as part of her 16th birthday present.

Naiya, who said later that Mack "inspired her to be better," danced in the second master class with seven women, including Emily Gibbs, who was set to dance at Kinetic's gala that night and appears professionally in other Kinetics productions.

Gibbs was anticipating a vigorous warm-up, and Mack delivered that, she said afterward.

"I'm interested in Alicia's creative energy and 'Ailey power,'" Gibbs said. "That class got my body really awake."

'Very difficult times'

Calling from her St. Louis home — which she shares with Kirby Mack, her husband of three years, when she's not touring — the dancer talked further about her injury-riddled career, which nearly came crashing to a halt in 2008.

Injury first forced Mack to leave the Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1999 when she was 20 years old. After a four-year absence from the stage, she joined Ailey in 2005 but left after three years, sidelined by injury once again and declaring she would never return.

"Those were very difficult times," she recalled. "I had trained my whole life to be a dancer, and I had no idea if I had the talent, the passion, or the skills to do anything else."

Eventually she earned two college degrees and was on the verge of accepting a job in corporate marketing at J.P. Morgan when destiny intervened.

After performing in a 2010 tribute to Judith Jamison, her former artistic director at Ailey and a role model, she realized she "wasn't finished with dance" and rejoined Ailey a year later.

She had discovered during her hiatus that she has an autoimmune disorder that manifests itself as reactive arthritis, causing joint instability and leading to painful cartilage tears. But a new approach to nutrition, including a gluten-free diet, has made her a different and stronger person, she said.

Not only is she gracing the stage again, but she has formed D(n)A Arts Collective with her younger sister, Daisha Graf, a commercial dancer and singer who recently landed a contract with Epic Records. Their two brothers are business executives.

Her father is a Jewish businessman and her African-American mother is a professor at Howard University, who is an arts lover. Mack credits her parents for being "stand-up people who are always honest and truthful with me.

"They taught all of us that if we lead a righteous and good life, we can't go wrong," she said.

"Now I can say that I know life goes its own way, and that's changed my outlook," Mack said. "But I still say, 'Go for Plan A' in life. If that doesn't work out, have the tools to create another Plan A."



