

The New York Times

'It's About Connections': Alicia Graf Mack Remakes Juilliard Dance

By: Brian Seibert

June 2, 2023

Mack, whom one student called an agent of change, wants to “create a place where people feel like themselves” — and a model for the professional world.

When Alicia Graf Mack taught the final ballet class for students graduating in spring from the dance division of Juilliard, it was a gentle, valedictory session: a lot of laughter, inside jokes and memories, a few tears. She's a warm, gracious teacher who sometimes calls herself Mama Mack, and she got a little teary herself.

“I've had this feeling in my chest all week,” she said.

These were the first students that Mack admitted after taking over as dean and director of the division five years ago. She and the students had been through a lot together, including the pandemic and the many changes she has brought to one of the most prestigious and influential dance programs in the country.

Mack, 44, represents change. She is the first Black person to hold the position, and the youngest. Speaking in her office a few weeks before graduation, she said all her decisions flow from the goal of increasing equity, diversity, inclusion and belonging. But a look at those decisions makes clear that she is also about continuity. During the class, she kept slipping in allusions to her teachers and to teachers that she and the students had in common. She called the class a meditation on what bound them together, saying, “It's about connections, y'all.”

Many of the changes Mack has instituted seem long overdue. She has added hip-hop and West African dance. She's made sure that Spring Dances, a series in which students learn and perform classic works, includes choreographers of color — it didn't before — and more women. Specialized ballet classes that used to be divided by gender no longer are. Now, anyone can take pointe class.

Some of those changes might trouble traditionalists. But to imagine such a shake-up as contentious would be to get the wrong impression. Mack leads as gracefully as she dances. She understands balance. The Juilliard dance department, under her leadership, seems like a happy place.

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Told she was too tall by American Ballet Theater and New York City Ballet, Mack reinvented herself again, becoming a star of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and greatly expanding her stylistic range into modern, contemporary and hip-hop. When her condition flared up three years later, she returned to school, earning a master's degree in nonprofit management. **Asked back by the Ailey company, she squeezed out a few more years,** then moved into teaching dance at Washington University and Webster University in St. Louis. A child of professors, she found her “happy place” at universities, she said, and realized that helping serious students on the cusp of their careers was what she wanted to do.

By this point, she was married with two small children. When a mentor — Sharon Luckman, a former executive director of Ailey — told her about the Juilliard opening, she thought Luckman was fishing for recommendations. But Luckman wanted Mack to apply. “And with encouragement from my husband, I realized that everything I've done prepared me for a moment like this,” Mack said.

As someone aspiring toward a career in ballet, Winegarden wanted to dispel a pervasive idea that Juilliard isn't serious about the form. “We take ballet classes every day,” she said. What Juilliard has given her, she added, was a newfound passion for choreographing and a much wider range. “All the ways of moving enhance your ballet training rather than take away from it,” she said. **Isaiah Day has one more year at Juilliard — during which he will also be a new member of the Ailey company.** This is another change Mack has instituted, making it possible for students to accept a job offer and start living the dream while still completing their education.

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