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Alvin Ailey Dance Chooses Alicia Graf Mack to Be Next Leader

Mack, director of the dance division at Juilliard, will be the popular company's fourth artistic director.

By: Brian Seibert

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Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has chosen Alicia Graf Mack to be its next artistic director, it announced on Thursday.

A former member of the company, Mack, 45, currently the director of the dance division at Juilliard, will take on her new role in July.

"I have been inspired by the Ailey organization since I was a baby," Mack said in a phone interview. "I am feeling incredibly blessed and grateful for the opportunity."

Anthony A. Lewis, a board member who led the selection committee, said that during an extensive global search, Mack stood out for her emotional intelligence, humility and sense of purpose. "In Alicia, we saw a strength of character like Mr. Ailey's, along with a vision for the future," he said. "It became a clear choice."

Founded by Alvin Ailey in 1958, the company is one of the most popular and successful institutions in American dance, touring internationally and filling New York City Center for a month each winter. The organization also includes a junior company, Ailey II, and a thriving school. An exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, *Edges of Ailey*, focuses on the impact of the company and its founder.

Mack will be the organization's fourth artistic director, following Robert Battle, who stepped down suddenly last November, and Judith Jamison, who inherited the position from Ailey after his death in 1989 and who died this month. (Matthew Rushing has been filling in as interim artistic director.)

Mack, raised in Columbia, Md., trained in ballet and joined Dance Theater of Harlem at 17. Unusually tall, long-limbed and graceful, she became an immediate star, but injuries — eventually traced to a rheumatic disease — soon forced her to quit. After earning a degree in history at Columbia University, she returned to Dance Theater, which went on hiatus a year later because of debts.

Out of a job, she auditioned for American Ballet Theater but was told she was too tall. It was the Ailey company who hired her, exposing her to modern dance, hip-hop and other styles. She performed with the troupe from 2005 to 2008, left to earn a master's degree in nonprofit management, then returned from 2011 to 2014, before becoming a full-time educator.

"I am a nearly six foot tall Black woman," Graf said, "and to step into a company that embraced me for exactly who I am — that saw as special gifts what others viewed as barriers — allowed me to hone my craft, think about artistry and grow into myself."

Graf said she would need to settle in to the new job before making big decisions. But her choices, she said, will be guided by the Ailey tradition of "a connection to humanity and spirit," as well as by "Mr. Ailey's sense that his art and social justice were one and the same" and his often-quoted aim "to hold a mirror to society and to show people how beautiful they are."

"Ailey dancers are always aware that they are cultural ambassadors," she said, "and in these very complicated, discouraging times, the role of artists to bring beauty and hope is even more important."

Leaving Juilliard, where she has transformed the curriculum, will be hard, Graf said. "But I'm listening to the advice that I'm giving the dancers, specifically the seniors, that at a certain time you will know when it's time to make a change."

"I am so thrilled to be able to bring everything that I've learned back home to a company that I feel so connected to," she added. "I'm feeling clear-minded and ready to go."



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