

## A letter from the EDITOR



## Let There Be Art

I love that our Arts Issue is the last one of the year. On the heels of another successful (and bigger than ever) Umbrella Art Fair, and amid budget cuts and takeovers of artistic institutions across our great city and beyond, this is an exclamation mark.

Inherent in this punctuation is this message: Art matters and isn't going anywhere. In fact, it's only growing in its importance. As Bertolt Brecht suggested, art isn't merely a reflection of reality but a tool to shape it.

Shaping how we move through the world beautifully is the job of Alicia Graf Mack, the new artistic director of the renowned Alvin Ailey Dance Theater (ailey.org). I had the pleasure of interviewing Graf Mack for "Music in Motion." She's only the fourth artistic director in Ailey's rich 70-year history.

"I lead in the way an artist would—by being of service," Graf Mack, who grew



DC native Alicia Graf Mack is the new artistic director of Alvin Ailey Dance Theater.

up in Columbia, Md., told me. "See the artist before you. Honor who they are. Bring their gifts forward." She also told me it's a joy to witness dancers reach their revelatory moments, describing the instant a dancer stops performing steps and becomes fully engrossed in the story and character. "That's the high every artist craves," she said. "And that's when I know they've been successful."

You can witness this artistry when Ailey kicks off its North American tour in DC this winter (Warner Theatre, Jan. 30-Feb 8; gala, Feb. 4, warnertheatre.com).

Here's to a year ahead of seeing and making art that shapes our world.

M.C.

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PHOTOS BY TONY POWELL



Balenciaga denim jacket, denim skirt and boots, balenciaga.com; Chopard rings, chopard.com.

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On the Cover

Lucy Liu  
Photographed by Jeremy Choh  
Styled by Anna Katsaris  
Illustrations by Chir Yan Lim

Balenciaga denim jacket, denim skirt and boots, balenciaga.com; Chopard rings, chopard.com.

PHOTO BY JEREMY CHOH

by  
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TONY POWELL

# MUSIC in MOTION

As the new artistic director of the renowned Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, DC native Alicia Graf Mack brings historic perspective, grace and a measured vision to the company.

Alicia Graf Mack is only the fourth artistic director at Alvin Ailey in its 70-year history.





## “WE WANT TO EXPAND THE WAY WE DANCE AND MOVE, JUST AS OUR CULTURE UNFOLDS.”

—ALICIA GRAF MACK

Alicia Graf Mack (@aliciagrafmack) remembers the first time she understood what it meant to be a dancer. She wasn't on a stage or in a studio, but in the living room of her childhood home in Columbia, Md.

“There was always music in the house,” she recalls. Her family wasn't a dancing family, per se, but they kept the record player spinning. “We played records all the time. I would make up dances to various songs and move around the house.”

From that living room, her path unfolded through classical ballet schools in Columbia, modern classes, jazz requirements, even tap (“my knees did not like tap”), and into Baltimore and Washington, where her parents took her to see live dance. She remembers watching Ailey II at the Columbia Festival for the Arts. She saw Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (@alvinaiiley, ailey.org) when the company toured the DMV. For a young dancer who imagined herself a classical ballerina, Ailey was “part of my North Star,” she says.

That star guides her still. Graf Mack has become only the fourth artistic director in the company's nearly 70-year history—an astonishing lineage given the company's influence. And this winter, when Ailey brings its annual performances to the Warner Theatre (Jan. 30-Feb 8; gala benefit, Feb. 4, warnertheatre.org), the company will kick off its entire U.S. tour here in DC, marking her first season at the helm.

It is, in every sense, a homecoming.

“It feels very special to start the tour in the DMV,” she says. “A place where I can invite my family and my parents.” They now live in Ellicott City. She'll need a sizable ticket block to accommodate her local fans.

Most of those friends and family have watched her dance trajectory with glee. Graf Mack's career started with

the Dance Theatre of Harlem under Arthur Mitchell, quickly ascending to become a highly recognized principal ballerina. A celebrated artist, she later performed with Complexions Contemporary Ballet and made guest appearances with Alonzo King LINES Ballet. Her versatility led to collaborations with a diverse array of artists, including Beyoncé, John Legend, Alicia Keys and Jon Batiste.

Stepping into the artistic director role at Ailey doesn't intimidate her. If anything, she finds comfort in the clarity of the company's mission. Mr. Ailey's vision always guides men,” she says. “His strength, courage and authenticity—those still stand true today.” The legacy doesn't weigh on her; it buoys her. “I feel lucky to be the artistic director of an institution with a clear direction, a foundation, an identity.”

But she is also unequivocally forward-looking. What's different about Graf Mack from her predecessors is that she's a dancer, not a choreographer. While she'll always create, curation will be a large part of her vision. “We want to introduce new choreographers, new voices. We want to expand the way we dance and move, just as our culture unfolds. But we're always guided by the legacy,” she says.

That fusion—tradition held in one hand, evolution in the other—animates her first season. The performances will include an All Ailey program with quintessential classics by Alvin Ailey, featuring “Memoria,” “Night Creature,” a revival of “A Song for You,” Ailey's iconic “Cry,” and, of course, the transcendent “Revelations.”

“These are the works people come home to,” she says.

But the premiere will also showcase new or newly imagined works, including pieces by Fredrick Earl Mosley (@earlmosley\_diversityofdance) and Matthew Neenan (@matthewneenan). Among the most anticipated is “Song of the Ancharite,” a re-envisioning of Alvin Ailey's

"Hermit Songs" solo choreographed by her longtime collaborator and former dance partner, Jamar Roberts (@jamarrobertsofficial).

Roberts and Graf Mack began discussing the idea while looking at photographs from "Hermit Songs" at the Whitney Museum's *Edges of Ailey* exhibition.

"We thought we knew it because the photos are so much a part of our identity," she explains. With help from Ailey's archivists, they located rehearsal footage in which Ailey could be heard coaching but was never seen. Roberts took the opera libretto, changed the music and created a new solo "that imagines what Mr. Ailey would create today," she says. "There are many nods to the original. It honors the past but speaks now."

Another highlight, "Blink of an Eye" by Medhi Walerski, expands the company's technical boundaries. "The Ailey dancers are already the most virtuosic and expressive artists on the planet," she says. "This piece stretches them in new ways. As soon as audiences see it, they'll say, 'Ah, that makes sense.'"

If Graf Mack's artistic perspective is expansive, her leadership approach is equally textured and long in the making. The myth of the dancer pulled overnight from the stage into the corner office evaporates quickly when she talks about her rise.

"Sometimes people think I came out of the blue," she says with a smile. "But I was always educating myself." She studied at Columbia University, interned at JPMorgan and earned a master's degree in nonprofit management. She shadowed Ailey's former executive director, served as the company's union delegate, and spent nearly 12 years teaching in higher education (she was an assistant professor at Webster University and adjunct professor at the University of Houston and Washington University).

In addition to academic leadership, Graf Mack served as the first Black dean and director of the dance division at Juilliard School (where she received an honorary doctorate in 2025), also holding the distinction of being the youngest person ever to hold that role. This prepared her not only to lead an arts institution but to do so with an artist's sensibility.

"I lead in the way an artist would—by being of service," she says. Teaching is foundational: she holds pedagogy training from the Ailey School and a teaching certificate from American Ballet Theatre. Her philosophy is simple: "See the artist before you. Honor who they are. Bring their gifts forward."

She calls it her joy to witness dancers reach their revelatory moments: the instant when a dancer stops performing steps and becomes "music in motion," fully engrossed in story and character. "That's the high every artist craves," she says. "And that's when I know they've been successful."

As Graf Mack prepares to bring the company home to DC this February, there is both an inevitability and a freshness to the moment. The child who once floated through her Columbia living room now guides one of the world's most important cultural institutions.

She's still dancing, only now through others. And if her vision is any indication, Ailey's next decade and beyond will continue to honor the past while pushing into the future with clarity, courage and joy.

Alicia Graf Mack brings Alvin Ailey to DC this winter at Warner Theatre, Jan. 30-Feb. 8.

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—ALICIA GRAF MACK

