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A New Chapter Begins At The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

By: Okla Jones
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On December 3, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater opened its 2025–26 holiday season at New York City Center with a gala that marked a turning point for the company. The five-week engagement—running through January 4—signals the first full season under Artistic Director Alicia Graf Mack, and a moment where the heralded repertory leans into what audiences expect from Ailey, while expanding its vision for the next generation.

Graf Mack, the 46-year-old mother of two, stepped into her current position with a certain level of familiarity. She danced with the company for years, an experience that informed her approach as an artistic director. In respecting her predecessors, she feels that this endeavor is a responsibility, not simply her duty.

“I am fully aware of what this role carries,” she says. “I worked under Judith Jamison, who was my idol from the time I was little. I saw how she led. I also worked under Robert Battle and saw how he did things. I don’t take any of that lightly. But in order to do the work that needs to be done, I can’t stay frozen in the magnitude of it. I have to stay grounded. I have to be guided by what I know good dance to be, and how to create an environment where dancers can thrive.”

Among the season’s highlights is “Revelations,” which was performed with live music for six shows during opening weekend and the gala. The season also features Jamison’s “A Case of You” in a new production, alongside company premieres and five world premieres by choreographers Maija García, Fredrick Earl Mosley, Matthew Neenan, Jamar Roberts, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar in collaboration with Samantha Figgins and Chalvar Monteiro.

Alongside Matthew Rushing, Graf Mack was able to program this season with a bit more leeway than in previous years; something that really intrigued her. “I’m interested in what audiences can feel when dancers are given time,” she says. “We had an extended rehearsal period this year, which isn’t always possible for Ailey. Being in the studio with the dancers—teaching, coaching, watching how they move together—that matters. I think people will notice a shift in energy. It feels fresh in the room.”

Ironically, Graf Mack’s path to leadership was an unlikely one. She grew up knowing she wanted to dance, but running an institution? That was another story. When performing full-time became unsustainable, she turned toward education, earning a master’s degree in nonprofit management and teaching at several universities before landing at Juilliard, where she eventually became dean and director of dance.

“That’s where I really learned what [this job] requires,” she says. “It’s not a title. It’s how you show up every day. How you listen. How you lift people. How you manage the artistic alongside the administrative. Dance companies today need leaders who understand both. You can’t separate creative vision from fundraising, from marketing, from long-term sustainability. They all feed each other.”

As Artistic Director of Ailey, Graf Mack remains interested in how the company can expand its reach without losing its identity. Technology, partnerships, and new platforms are part of that conversation, but always in service of the work. “Alvin Ailey leaned into humanity,” she says. “That’s the through line. The world has changed since his time.

The way we reach people has changed. But the responsibility stays the same. We're here to move people. To tell stories others can't tell. To be brave."

During my interview with Alicia, the most moving moments were when she reflected on her relationship with the late Judith Jamison—her predecessor, and her north star. As a young girl, Graf Mack had Jamison's image on her wall and later worked under her guidance. Their connection deepened over time, shifting from director to mentor, confidant, and friend.

"She studied everything," she says of Jamison. "How you speak. How you carry yourself. How you prepare a room. She was meticulous and warm and funny and stylish. She didn't rush anything. After she retired, she stayed present in my life. She checked in. She showed up. She believed in me." Graf Mack now occupies Jamison's former office. Much of the furniture remains, and so does the feeling. "I sit at Mr. Ailey's desk," she explains. "That wasn't negotiable. I'm aware of where I am every day. I don't feel pressure. I feel gratitude."

The years of practice, education, and previous roles within Graf Mack's career culminated with the opening night gala, which took place earlier this month. The evening honored board chair Daria L. Wallach, featured performances from Samara Joy and violinist Melissa White, along with boasting a guest list that included notable figures such as Jasmine Guy, Phylicia Rashad, Lorraine Toussaint, and Sunny Hostin, among others. As glamorous a position as the Artistic Director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater may be, for Graf Mack, the goal remains simple.

"I want people to leave the theater feeling lighter," she explains. "Ailey has always done that. You come in carrying whatever the day gave you. You leave feeling like you can face it. That's the work."

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