FAMILY STYLE

Take Flight

Action enables meaning in Alicia Graf Mack's vision of physicality. As dancer-turned-artistic director of the largest modern company in the United States, her convictions are not just effective—they are truths.

By: Alastair Macauley

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The first time Alicia Graf Mack caught sight of Alvin Ailey dancers, she was a young child in Columbia, Maryland watching them on a V.H.S. tape in her family home. "I was very shy," she says from her own 9-year-old daughter's bedroom in East St. Louis. "I rarely spoke out loud." It was Donna Wood's 1985 solo performance of *Cry* that stuck with her. "She embodied all of these different women with such dignity and clarity," recalls Graf Mack, who started studying ballet at 2-and-a-half years old before establishing herself as one of America's foremost dancers at the end of the last century. "I was usually the only girl of color in all of the spaces where I trained, and here was this beautiful woman of color on my screen."

Her ballet skills at 17 led her to the Dance Theatre of Harlem, where she absorbed the precepts of choreographer George Balanchine and co-founder Arthur Mitchell, whom she recalls demanded a very specific musicality. "He encouraged us to think classically while understanding that everything comes down to movement," she says of Mitchell. Seven years later, she fulfilled her childhood dream when she joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 2005. Under the direction of Judith Jamison, she was coached by legendary dancers including Wood herself. "Each artist passed her information down like a storyteller with a lot of care and responsibility," says Graf Mack. The choreographer Ronald K. Brown introduced her to West African dance. "I was seen as a ballerina in the room, but he saw something else in me," she reflects. She singles out the importance of his 1999 Ailey creation *Grace*, with its wide palette of different leg movements and rhythms, and its multidirectional textures. In the performance, movement becomes philosophy. "Where there is struggle, there is also unwavering faith," she says.



Onstage Graf Mack is handsome and long, a distinctive embodiment of line—and purposeful, too. She approaches choreography with a hunger for finding new aspects of herself. When Wayne McGregor's 2006 ballet *Chroma* entered Ailey's repertory in 2013, she leaned into its new coordinations of limbs and torso with rippling and athletic physicality. When she stepped off the stage in 2018 to become director of the dance division at the Juilliard School, she continued her expansive view of dance, adding West African and hip-hop courses to the curriculum and expanding opportunities for student choreography. Everything came full circle earlier this year when Graf Mack returned to Ailey's eponymous company as artistic director; looking back, she sees the late choreographer as her North Star.

While she never met Ailey, who passed away in 1989, his impact is paramount. "Mr. Ailey said that he wanted to hold a mirror to our society, to show people how beautiful they are," she shares. "The company was always multiracial. We are not a monolith." The level of the dancers' talent and dedication is not lost on the artistic director who was once in their shoes. "To keep them hungry and moving forward, you have to start to think about dance beyond the stage," she explains. "How do you utilize commercial culture? How do you utilize technology? How do you utilize streaming media to amplify the work of the company?"



Today Graf Mack retains the same bright spirit as when she first made a name for herself. Eloquence, clarity, and warmth are all part of her no-nonsense persona. She manages to balance being a devoted mother (yes, her daughter practices dance) with running the Ailey institution, yet she doesn't seem rushed. When asked what she plans for the program, the director replies that she has no desire to change the essence of the company. Rather, she sees Ailey's original tenure as a blueprint. It is a mission that goes far beyond dance. "I very much appreciate the idea that one's identity can be so beautifully represented onstage and inspire people," she says. "I hope to carry the flame."