



Alicia Graf Mack Knows Dance Is About Connecting the Past, Present, and Future

Alvin Ailey's new artistic director on legacy, leadership, and navigating a fraught political landscape

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How does anyone make art in this dizzying moment? In our Now issue, Bazaar speaks to 10 creative people—dancers, comedians, pop singers, writers—about what fuels their work in 2026.

Alicia Graf Mack, a former dancer with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, was named the company's artistic director in 2025. Founded in 1958 by Alvin Ailey to center Black life, history, and spirituality onstage, the company has long been one of the most influential institutions in the dance world. Graf Mack, a former director of the dance program at Juilliard with a background in arts administration, steps into the role at a pivotal moment for both the company and the culture at large, as cultural institutions face mounting political pressure, shifting support, and renewed questions around representation, access, and community.

This is my third time at Alvin Ailey: first, as a dancer, in 2005; then returning after an injury and years in higher education and arts administration; and now as artistic director. Each chapter has prepared me to lead differently. I'm not only developing artistry and curating seasons; I'm fundraising, working with our board, thinking about marketing, partnerships, sustainability—about how we set up the organization for the future. These roles require me to wear so many hats, and I think that's what leadership in the arts demands right now.

Alvin Ailey was so ahead of his time that his vision still feels like the blueprint. In 1958, when ballet companies were telling Eurocentric stories of kings and queens, he put Black life onstage—our spirituality, our struggles, our joy—and insisted it was universal. He said dance came from the people and should always be delivered back to the people. That's still our mantra. The entire organization is built on that idea of accessibility—that people can come to the theater, see themselves reflected, and understand what they're experiencing without feeling like it's something untouchable.

This season, which I co-curated with Matthew Rushing, really highlights Ailey and our artists at their best. We're performing works like [Medhi Walerski's] *Blink of an Eye*, which is incredibly virtuosic and musical, and Frederick Earl Mosley's *Embrace*, set to music people know—Stevie Wonder, Etta James, Maxwell. There's something powerful about recognizing the music right away. It grounds the experience. It allows people to just feel. And that's important, because sometimes concert dance can feel intellectual or exclusive. We want audiences to come in, feel something, and enjoy themselves.

Today, standing onstage as a company comprised primarily of dancers of color from all over the world—with different body types, different backgrounds—and speaking truths through the body is radical. The idea that we are here to uplift and bring joy is a form of not only protest but resilience and resistance. People come to the theater as a balm—they want to be transported from what we go through every day. And we take that responsibility seriously.

I'm in Washington, D.C., right now. I grew up in this area. As a kid, I came to the Kennedy Center and saw my dreams unfold on stage. That experience created a pathway for my life. So when arts institutions are under pressure, when funding shifts or leadership changes, I think about the child sitting in that theater whose life could be transformed. We're performing here at the Warner Theatre, and the community has come out in such a powerful way. It reminds me that our responsibility is to stay rooted in the people—to make sure access doesn't disappear, even when the landscape shifts.

Our mission is not only about excellence in dance, though we demand that. It's about legacy, access, community, connecting humanity. We lean on our audiences, our supporters, our board, and our donors. We have to be innovative in how we sustain the organization, whether that's through partnerships or endowments or new ways of presenting the work. It's about making sure it continues for generations to come.

I sit at Alvin Ailey's desk. Judith Jamison's furniture is still in my office. Carmen de Lavallade was my mentor—we spoke in her last days. These are people who shifted our culture but who touched my life in a deeply personal way. Their presence is not abstract—it's something I feel every day. I look at how they created hope in their generations. Their spirits are alive in our work. When times are difficult, I look to how they created hope, how they moved forward with courage and clarity. That gives me strength. When you know where you come from, you know how to build forward, even now.

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