

'Chicago feels very familiar'

Meet Alicia Graf Mack, Alvin Ailey's newest artistic director

By Darcel Rockett
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Look through imagery of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and you'll see years of works of artistry that showcase Black bodies defying gravity with grace, power and deep emotion. Some of those pictures might be of Alicia Graf Mack in her tilted, lithe aerial side split. The former principal Ailey dancer (from 2005 to 2014) is now the dance company's new artistic director, only the fourth artistic director since the New York company's formation by its namesake in 1958.

Graf Mack's inaugural curation of an Ailey season can be seen at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago April 24-26, an engagement that brings the company to the location for the 57th time to conclude the Auditorium's 2025-26 Celebrating Women Leaders in Dance season with two programs and six new works, including Chicago premieres and the Alvin Ailey masterpiece finale "Revelations."

Before rejoining Ailey in her new role, Graf Mack was mentored by the late Jamison, a former Alvin Ailey artistic director. Graf Mack's career is a mix of performance, leadership and dance education that began with the Dance Theatre of Harlem, where she was principal ballerina, and extended to performances with Complexions Contemporary Ballet and guest appearances with Alonzo King LINES Ballet. Graf Mack returned to Ailey after serving as dean and director of the Dance Division at The Juilliard School from 2018 to 2025 — the first Black person and the youngest to do so.

"As a dancer, I have probably danced in Chicago every year," Graf Mack said. "Chicago is where I got engaged. I have family there. My children and husband often go to Chicago to be in a bigger city. I have family there who have a restaurant (A Grill in Hyde Park) that I love to go to. Chicago feels very familiar. I like the energy."

Graf Mack, an East Coast girl now living in East St. Louis, raising her family, spoke with the Tribune about stepping into the new position and the tone she plans to set going forward. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What can longtime fans and new fans expect under your tenure?

A: I think people can expect to feel that they're stepping into the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater that they love and respect and look forward to, and just like Mr. Ailey did, we will always bring fresh voices and new works to the stage, while honoring the legacy that we are honored to represent.

Q: This April performance schedule looks like you're paying homage to the ancestors while talking about community and love.

A: You are so right. That is what it is, that is who I am as a person. I aim to always be authentic with how I walk through this world and how I kind and how I see Ailey is, it is always in tribute to the people who came before us, especially Mr. Ailey himself. That is the through-line aesthetic that we will always hold to, even when we make new works and we innovate.

There are six new works that we are presenting this year in Chicago, the first is "Blink of an Eye" by Medhi Walenski. This piece is set to the music of Bach. What I love is that through this very virtuosic movement, we make this very old music feel contemporary, vibrant, and new. Then there is "Embrace" by Frederick Earl Mosley, set to popular music by Stevie Wonder, Maxwell, Ed Sheeran and Pink — songs that help to connect to our audiences. Something that is very much part of the Ailey aesthetic is that the work is never so abstract or intellectual that we lose our audience. Using popular music helps connect to the audience with music that they know. We have a work called "Difference Between" by Matthew Neenan, set to a canvas of music by Heather Christian. It is a work about community and connection.

There's also "Song of the Anchoress," a solo created by Jamar Roberts, a longtime dancer in the company. It is inspired by a solo that Alvin Ailey created for himself in 1961 called "Hermit Songs." Then we have "Jazz Island" by Matia Garcia — a Caribbean folktale written by Geoffrey Holder, another one of our Ailey ancestors, from a short story called "Black Gods, Green Islands." We have a new production of "A Case of You," choreographed by Judith Jamison, as we always want to keep her voices alive in our repertoire. I feel very connected to this work because it is the first work that I learned in 2005 when I joined the



Alicia Graf Mack in front of Judith Jamison's mural at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater headquarters at the Joan Weil Center for Dance in New York City. ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

company. I thought it was fitting in my first year to bring it back. Lastly, we have "Grace" by Ronald K. Brown, set to the music of Fela Kuti, Jennifer Holliday and others. It is a signature, classic work that always brings the house down.

Q: What was it like to be mentored by Jamison?

A: Amazing. She was a singular, graceful visionary who was always very intentional... she always appeared like a form of the divine, like she was not of this earth. She was a very tough director. I very much respected that professional relationship. However, when she became artistic director emerita, and I went on building a family, having kids, starting a new chapter in my career, she then became more of a motherly figure, asking about the kids. When I started to lead at Juilliard, she was a huge support. She would come to the performances. She started following the students' growth over the years. She was a cheerleader in every way to me, but also to so many people.

Q: What was it like leading Juilliard?

A: Leading at Juilliard was an incredible opportunity for me to continue to grow my leadership skills and for me to continue to impart all of the knowledge that I had gained over my life as a dancer and a professor to some of the most gifted young people on this planet. It allowed me to cultivate an eye, an aesthetic for a very high quality of excellence in the arts. It honed my ability to identify talent, to grow talent, to nurture artists, to create an environment where artists could thrive. That meant looking at it from an inclusion and diversity lens, a holistic look at what kind of environment and culture you need to make so that you create an atmosphere of excellence from many different perspectives.

Q: Your tenure at Juilliard centered on diversity, equity and inclusion. What does it mean to be doing this work now in the current climate?

A: Ailey, the company, and Ailey himself as a man, has always been a



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beacon of hope, spirit, joy and authenticity for individuals and for the world. Mr. Ailey was a product of being a child in the Jim Crow Era South. He built this empire on the idea of beauty and the dignity of people of color in the United States and Black Americans, and wanted to showcase that beauty on the highest level, and that is what we continue to do in 2026. Despite the cultural climate, we continue to aim to be that beacon of light for people and a demonstration of the power of the performing arts to create incredible connections, bridges across divisions.

Q: At Juilliard, you were trying to change the culture; now you're at Alvin Ailey pushing the envelope. How different is that pivot for you as a creator?

A: From the outside, it can look like at Juilliard, the diversity piece was at the forefront. But honestly, it was the idea of what I had experienced at Ailey as a dancer — the idea that your identity,

body type and uniqueness are seen as an asset. That is what I aimed to bring to Juilliard: the idea that our diversity brings a richness of ideas, which then makes our artistry even more excellent. That is something that I experienced firsthand being a dancer with Ailey, and what I aim to bring to all spaces, not just Juilliard. At Ailey, I aim to do the exact same thing. We have dancers of color, dancers who represent the beauty of the world in our company, in our schools — extremely diverse, and we always want to amplify and honor that to be an example for the rest of the field and the rest of the world. I think the work is the same idea. How I operate has not shifted, even though now I'm working within a different space. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs April 24 at 7:30 p.m.; April 25 at 1 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.; and April 26 at 3 p.m. at the Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Ida B. Wells Drive; tickets from \$46 at 312.341-2300 or auditoriumtheatre.org/events