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She's ready to move Alvin Ailey boldly forward

As the new artistic director, Alicia Graf Mack leads with authenticity and reclaims movement as storytelling.

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On a recent Tuesday afternoon, just hours after arriving in Atlanta, Alicia Graf Mack gathered with about 30 dancers from Spelman College for an Alvin Ailey master class.

After greeting the students by name, Graf Mack began leading a series of movements, placing a hand on her chest and breathing in deeply.

To a heavy drumbeat, the dancers fell into pliés before lifting and lengthening their bodies upward. As they moved, Graf Mack reminded them the work of dance, even during warmup, is akin to storytelling.

This moment of grounding, teaching and connecting is perhaps an early indication of what we can expect from Graf Mack in her role as the new artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, which makes its annual appearance at the Fox Theatre from Feb. 11-15.

A twice-former company member, Graf Mack is the fourth artistic director since Alvin Ailey founded the modern dance company in 1958. Ailey believed in accessible storytelling, using the power of deep personal experience to create connections through dance.



After Ailey's death in 1989, Judith Jamison, an Ailey dancer from 1965 to 1980, succeeded him as director and left an indelible mark, raising the company's profile and building its six-story home in New York City.



Jamison, who died last fall, had passed the baton to Robert Battle in 2011. In 12 years as artistic director, Battle expanded the idea of what the company could perform, adding the work of choreographers who were not versed in the Black aesthetic. During his tenure, Ailey dancers, including Graf Mack, had the freedom to interpret world class choreography in their own way.

These are the blueprints left by past directors and, when we spoke by phone a few days before her visit to Atlanta, Graf Mack said they have inspired her to move boldly forward and lead with authenticity.

"We want to make sure we are telling authentic stories and uplifting the voices of new and innovative choreographers," she said. "It takes entrepreneurial thinking to think beyond the touring model ... but always stay true to our identity as a company rooted in Mr. Ailey's mission and the values that he set forth."

It will undoubtedly be a challenge to lead a 67-year-old company through the 21st century while still honoring the vision and legacy of Ailey, but Graf Mack is well-equipped to lead the charge.

Her Ailey connections run deep. As a child, she attended company performances and pinned posters of Jamison to the walls of her bedroom.

"Every night I looked at this poster of a tall Black woman who was blazing a trail," said Graf Mack, who at 5 feet 10 inches earns comparisons to Jamison in both height and comportment. "Her impact on my life is immeasurable."

The legendary figure, who hired Graf Mack as an Ailey dancer, would also become a mentor and a model.





“I saw how she led the company but also how she would represent the company in interviews, on stage and teaching,” Graf Mack said.

After two turns with Dance Theater of Harlem beginning at age 17, Graf Mack joined Ailey in 2005. She was an immediate standout, singled out by New York critics for a star turn in her debut season. But an autoimmune condition that had interrupted her career with Dance Theater of Harlem resurfaced.

Graf Mack used the time away, in both instances, to further her education, earning a bachelor’s degree in history and a master’s degree in nonprofit management.

She returned to Ailey as a dancer in 2011 for a three-year stint before moving on to become the youngest and first Black female dean and director of the dance division at The Juilliard School.

Graf Mack spent seven years as the face of the division, curating work for the dancers to perform, developing her administrative and leaderships skills, and gaining the kind of experience that would serve her well in her new role at Ailey.

As she steps into the spotlight for her inaugural season as artistic director, she is off to a strong start.

In collaboration with associate artistic director Matthew Rushing, Graf Mack has curated a repertoire that balances new works and old favorites. For Atlanta’s popular Valentine’s Day performance, “Embrace,” a new piece by Fredrick Earl Mosley, examines love in all its shapes and forms and is set to music by Stevie Wonder, Ed Sheeran, Des’reé and other artists.

“It is a full swoon of a work that will really take the audience to a higher place,” Graf Mack said.

Also featured is “A Case of You,” a sensual duet excerpted from Jamison’s 2005 work “Reminiscent” danced to music by Diana Krall.

“We felt it was necessary to highlight Ms. Jamison’s work, especially this year,” Graf Mack said. The piece is particularly meaningful to her, Graf Mack said, because it is the first she learned as a dancer at Ailey.

In the world premiere of “Song of the Anchorite,” Ailey choreographer Jamar Roberts presents a new take on a 1961 Ailey solo, while “Grace” marks the 25th anniversary of Ronald T. Brown’s work connecting African and American dance. A company premiere, “Blink of an Eye” by Medhi Walerski explores the relationship between dance and music.



Each performance ends with “Revelations,” Ailey’s 1960 masterpiece that serves as a tribute to his heritage and his people.

As day rolls into evening on Spelman’s campus, Graf Mack continues coaxing dancers to point to the sky, reach across the table, lengthen to infinity or tilt their heads as if letting water fall from their ears.

This is how one tells a story through dance — not moving but moving with intention. And this, it seems, is how Graf Mack is prepared to lead — not merely leading but leading with intention.