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A Dance Leader's Revelatory Journey

Once a young fan, Alicia Graf Mack is now the Artistic Director of Alvin Ailey

By: Celia Wren

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16 On Stage

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BY CELIA WREN

Alicia Graf Mack remembers when the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater became her North Star. She was about 8 years old, growing up in Howard County, Maryland, when she saw a VHS tape of the solo "Cry," an Ailey classic.

Graf Mack remembers "being so taken by what I was seeing on my television: this image of this beautiful, tall — I'm extremely tall — Black woman that was obviously so communicative and expressive in her movement. I'd also never seen a dancer wear cornrows in her hair." And the performer on the tape, Donna Wood, was "someone with my skin tone."

Decades later, after an acclaimed career as a dancer and status-quo-disrupting educator, Graf Mack, 46, is the newest artistic director of Ailey — the fourth in its nearly 68-year history — presiding over the renowned

New York-based company as it arrives in Washington to launch a national tour from the Warner Theatre.

In recent years, the troupe was an annual visitor to the Kennedy Center — but it has played the Warner in the past, and its 2026 arrangement with the venue allows for more D.C. performances than it had at the center, the company says. The upcoming lineup of different programs will include legacy highlights such as "Revelations" but also new repertoire, including Jamar Roberts's "Song of the Anchorite" and Fredrick Earl Mosley's "Embrace," which is set to tunes by pop artists including Stevie Wonder, Ed Sheeran and Pink.

Same city, different location. Old favorites, new voices. The balance between continuity and novelty is

SEE GRAF MACK ON 17

If you go

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER
Warner Theatre, 513 13th St. NW. 202-783-4000.
ailey.org, warnertheatre.org.

Dates: Friday-Feb. 8.

Prices: \$63-\$299.



WILLIAM HILTON



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ABOVE: Alicia Graf Mack is artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater after a career as a dancer and trailblazing educator. LEFT: One of her early inspirations was Alvin Ailey dancer Donna Wood, tall and expressive.

GRAF MACK FROM 16

in keeping with what Graf Mack, 46, sees as her mandate, as she explained via Zoom from Illinois, where she lives with her husband and children when not away on Ailey duties.

"Something that I am committed to," she says, "is to uplift the aesthetic, the mission, the original intent of the company," which includes a "blueprint for innovation" set down by modern dance visionary Alvin Ailey, who wanted his company to be a platform for other choreographers, not merely for himself.

Washington-region arts helped ink the blueprint for Graf Mack's career. Raised in Columbia and Ellicott City by supportive parents, a Howard University professor and a community organizer, she started dance classes at age 2½. Training at Kinetics Dance Theatre and other organizations exposed her to multiple styles, and she saw the Ailey company perform live in D.C. and Baltimore.

When she was 11, she was discovered by instructor Donna Pidel, then with Ballet Royale Institute of Maryland. Reached recently by phone, Pidel remembers going holiday shopping at the mall in Columbia and noticing, among youngsters giving a recital, a kid so gifted she "looked like she had been beamed down from another planet."

Graf Mack went on to study with Pidel and focus on ballet. Even then, the young dancer showed leadership potential. "She was emotionally a very strong person who knew who she was. She was really helpful to those around her, and always very encouraging," Pidel recalls.

Graf Mack moved to New York to join Dance Theatre of Harlem, a famed ballet troupe, at age 17. Her striking height — she is 5-foot-10, or 6-foot-2 on pointe — would not impede her career. In New York, she earned an undergraduate degree in history at Columbia University. After Dance Theatre went on hiatus in 2004, she joined the Ailey company.

"Revelations," a masterpiece about pain, resilience and joy, was among the first pieces of Ailey repertoire she learned. She can still relive her first time dancing the work in public, hearing the initial "hum of 'I Been 'Buked,' the first section."

"You lift your eyes to the sky. The curtain goes up. And I remember having this feeling come over me of, 'This is the moment that you have been working so hard for,'" she says.

Set to traditional African American spirituals, "Revelations" is endlessly popular with audiences. Graf Mack says overfamiliarity is never an issue for the dancers because the choreogra-



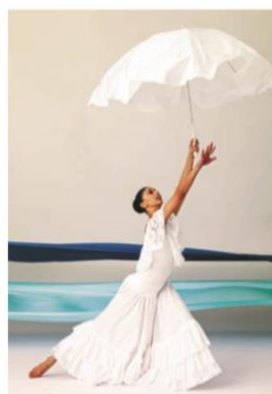
ANDREW ECCLES

Artistic director Alicia Graf Mack, who grew up in Maryland, stands among company members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. The troupe will perform 11 shows at the Warner Theatre in D.C.



PAUL KOLNIK

ABOVE: Graf Mack performs with Jamar Roberts in Judith Jamison's "Reminisce." RIGHT: She holds one of the famous umbrellas as a dancer in Alvin Ailey mainstay "Revelations."



ANDREW ECCLES



PAUL KOLNIK

The company's new repertoire includes Fredrick Earl Mosley's "Embrace," which is set to pop tunes.

phy resonates so fully with the day-to-day.

"As a dancer, if I was feeling tired, if I was feeling frustrated, if I was feeling excited, if I had a life experience," that episode could fuel a "Revelations" per-

formance, she says.

She does admit that it's a heavy lift to hold the iconic umbrella, as she sometimes did, in a bustling section of the piece that mulls purification and catharsis. "You're holding it for several min-

utes, and then you're running with it, so the resistance from the air and everything makes it quite heavy. So you have to have a good amount of strength. Which I think is also emblematic of what the work means and, again,

brings authenticity to it, because you are literally trying to hold this role and this instrument" to support fellow performers.

She danced with Ailey from 2005 to 2008 and — after an injury-prompted break during which she got married and earned a master's — again from 2011 to 2014. She subsequently became the dean and director of the dance division at the Juilliard School, where she shook up the curriculum, adding West African dance and hip-hop emphases and permitting students to study pointe technique regardless of gender.

Last June, shortly before she officially took over as artistic director, the Ailey company announced that its 2026 Washington sojourn would be at the Warner and promoted by the entertainment entity Live Nation. The shift from the Kennedy Center was perhaps all the more striking because Ailey dancers helped launch the center in 1971, performing in the premiere of Leonard Bernstein's "Mass," which dance maker Ailey choreographed.

Graf Mack explains the decision by saying: "We have such a loyal, enthusiastic community of supporters in Washington, D.C., and we had the opportunity to partner with Live Nation to present 11 performances as an expanded run at the Warner Theatre. So we felt that that was the best way to bring our work to the D.C. community." (The company's most recent Kennedy Center stints were under a week.)

Asked whether the move had anything to do with the Trump administration, which has instituted a presidential takeover of the Kennedy Center, with resulting artist withdrawals, Graf Mack said: "We want to bring great dance to the people. That is the mission of the [Ailey company]. Mr. Ailey always stated that dance came from the people and should always be delivered back to the people. And the opportunity to perform at the Warner Theatre allowed us to have 11 expansive performances, and we're able to present more programs, distinctly different programs. This is an exciting opportunity."

So how does she approach an era when American artists may fear political fallout, and the values of diversity, equity and inclusion are often under partisan siege?

"The Ailey organization approaches the work as we have always approached the work," Graf Mack says. "Since 1958, Ailey has been presenting authentic stories of Black America, stories that unite our humanity and touch our spirit. And that has been unchanged — even now, in 2026."