

Danses avec la plume

Yannick Lebrun: "Alvin Ailey is fundamentally a company that brings people together."

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The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater returns to Paris from October 7th to 11th at the Palais des Congrès . This provides an opportunity for another conversation with Yannick Lebrun, the French dancer with the American company . How has the company evolved since the Covid pandemic and the arrival of its new artistic director, Alicia Graf Mack, in 2025? How does the dancer see himself now within the company, having joined almost 20

years ago? What are his thoughts on the ballets in this tour, from the iconic *Revelations* to the new pieces? An encounter with a dancer who champions the Alvin Ailey legacy with unwavering passion.

The last time we spoke, we were in the midst of the Covid crisis, in 2020. How has the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater evolved since then?

Covid disrupted many things; we had to reinvent ourselves, reorganize, and navigate the initial waves of the pandemic. But we're back on track. A new generation of dancers has arrived, and we've resumed touring. Today, I see things with a great deal of positivity, I would even say serenity. The company has also evolved with the arrival of Alicia Graf Mack as artistic director, who is now beginning her second season.

What new dynamic does it bring?

She's a former dancer with Alvin Ailey; I danced with her for quite a few years. Then she taught dance elsewhere, notably at the Juilliard School (editor's note: a prestigious music and dance school in New York, where Alicia Graf Mack headed the Dance Department from 2018 to 2025). Alicia Graf Mack wants to continue to share Alvin Ailey's legacy: we still dance the choreographer's great classics like *Revelations* and *Night Creature*, which must endure. But she also offers her own voice and presents the public with a modern repertoire. She invites choreographers who bring a different touch to the company, challenging the dancers of this new generation. She also takes risks, inviting choreographers less known to the public, with her own preferences and what she wants to see. All of this gives the company a different feel and helps it evolve.

Let's start with the classics, like *Revelations* , Alvin Ailey's iconic ballet. You've been dancing it for 20 years, since joining the junior company in 2006. How has your interpretation of the work evolved over all these years?

I've danced this ballet so many times... It's just crazy when I think about it. And I never tire of dancing this piece. You never get tired of it because it grabs you by the gut, by your very core. *Revelations* asks us to find something very deep within ourselves in order to convey all those emotions. When I was young, I saw it primarily as a display of virtuosity and everything it projected. The trio "Sinner Man" made such a strong impression on me, with all that physicality, that technique... Then, as the years go by, when you dance "I Wanna Be Ready" or "Fix Me, Jesus," you think: Okay, there's the technique, but you mustn't neglect the transcendent, spiritual, and emotional aspects of the piece. The audience really expects to be transported. Alvin Ailey created this ballet for those emotions. That's also why the work leaves such a mark on the audience, why it resonates so deeply.



There are always nights when you don't feel your best. But the audience doesn't see our physical or personal problems. Now, approaching 40, after years of dancing *Revelations* , I ask myself, " Yannick, tonight, what do you have to give? " What can I draw upon with all this maturity? How will I use my arms tonight? My gaze? Where will I project my energy? All of this is important to connect with the audience.

What was your favorite scene from *Revelations* 20 years ago, and what is your favorite now?

That's a good question! Originally, I really loved dancing the trio "Sinner Man," it's so... wow. Now, and I already loved dancing that solo back then, but even more so with age, I'd say the solo "I Wanna Be Ready." I feel so peaceful dancing it, with such a strong connection to the audience.



You are also dancing a lesser-known Alvin Ailey ballet for French audiences during this tour, *A Song for You*. What does it represent?

A Song for You is part of the ballet *Love Songs*. I've been dancing this solo for over ten years now. It's truly one of Alvin Ailey's masterpieces, demanding a great deal emotionally, spiritually, technically, and physically. I love the song that accompanies this solo, *A Song for You* by Donny Hathaway, a legend known to all Americans. Over time, this solo has allowed me to reflect on my entire journey since Guyana, all the sacrifices I've made in my life and career, and also to realize how fortunate I've been

to travel the world with this company. This solo speaks to me deeply. It's so fluid, so gentle, and above all, it embodies Alvin Ailey's choreographic style, which I adore—a blend of modern dance, Horton, jazz, Graham... It's so organic. And it blends so beautifully with the music. This is also part of Alvin Ailey's genius: this piece was created in 1972, it still endures and remains just as impactful in 2026.

You also dance two much more recent ballets: *Song of the Anchorite* by Jamar Roberts (2025) and *Many Angels* by Lar Lubovitch (2024), which is the featured ballet on the tour. What do these two ballets evoke?

I really love the work of Jamar Roberts, who has already choreographed several pieces for the company, of which he was a former dancer. *Song of the Anchorite* has something very solemn, spiritual, and meditative about it. An Anchorite is someone who separates themselves from all of society, remaining aloof from all forms of social life to enter their own bubble and remain focused and in prayer with God—or whatever comes from on high. The piece carries a great sense of devotion, and the dance is very centered, blending beautifully with Barber's music. As for *Many Angels* by Lar Lubovitch, what a magnificent piece! It's a ballet that soothes me. There's something very simple and organic about it, full of poetry. I dance a duet in this piece, a truly suspended moment that will take the audience's breath away—I won't say any more! The Parisian audience is really going to be delighted with these two programs, which showcase the different styles we explore in the company.

You'll be 40 in a few months, and you've been with the company for 20 years, including your time in Ailey II, the junior airline. You've inevitably acquired a different stature over the years, especially with regard to the younger generation. How does that work?

When I joined the company in 2008, I never imagined I'd reach this point. Let's just say it's quite surprising for me, even though I expected this moment to arrive when I saw that my body would allow me to dance for a few more years. I have this rigor and work discipline, and it's something the new generation sees, as well as my career path, everything I know within the company, the ballets I've danced. I take this role very seriously. Passing on knowledge at Alvin Ailey also means passing on values, this love and passion for being a dancer in this company, even if everyone approaches things in their own way. For the past few years, I've been leading rehearsals, passing on certain parts of the ballets. The management trusts me, and that's gratifying. By becoming an example for the new generation, you realize that hard work finally pays off.



Are there things that the previous generation may have told you when you arrived, that you are now passing on to younger generations?

Ah yes! Like continuing to take dance classes, being disciplined, not resting on your laurels, and remaining serious during rehearsals. This discipline allows you to stay ready. As they say in English: "Stay ready, so you don't have to get ready." It's also a certain way of approaching movement, of tackling certain choreographies. When you're young, you want to try everything. With age, you learn to use all the dimensions of your body, you learn to add nuance.

We live in a very polarized and divided world today, especially in the United States. How are your tours going there? In the United States, the company has a real fan base, with cities like Chicago, Atlanta, and Washington eagerly awaiting our performances each year. Especially since we don't just perform there; we also offer classes, masterclasses, and more. We have the opportunity to visit different communities, to see the United States from end to end, which broadens our horizons and makes us feel like we're making a difference. And it goes beyond us, which is what makes the company unique. Because, whether in the United States or elsewhere in the world, people crave Alvin Ailey. Because they want to be transported, to feel something powerful. And fundamentally, Alvin Ailey is a company that brings people together, and that's the magic of its popularity. It allows people to forget their differences and what divides them, bringing them back to a form of communion. It reveals humanity, and therefore, hope. Just by listening to the music of *Revelations*, Gospels that come from negro spirituals, you are gripped by the guts, even if you don't speak the language.

You're about to turn 40, a pivotal age in a dancer's career. How do you envision the coming years? Are you already planning for what's next?

Today, my body allows me to do what I want to do and to continue to grow and dance. So for now, I'm continuing to give my best on stage and I'm planning to stay with the company for a few years. Looking ahead, even though I have some ambitions, I don't want to set any clear goals right now, especially since things can change very quickly in the world of dance, and in the arts in general. It could be on stage, in other forms of performance, or even in teaching, perhaps in French Guiana where I was born. In any case, I know I'll want to continue using my talent internationally, in New York, France, French Guiana, or beyond.