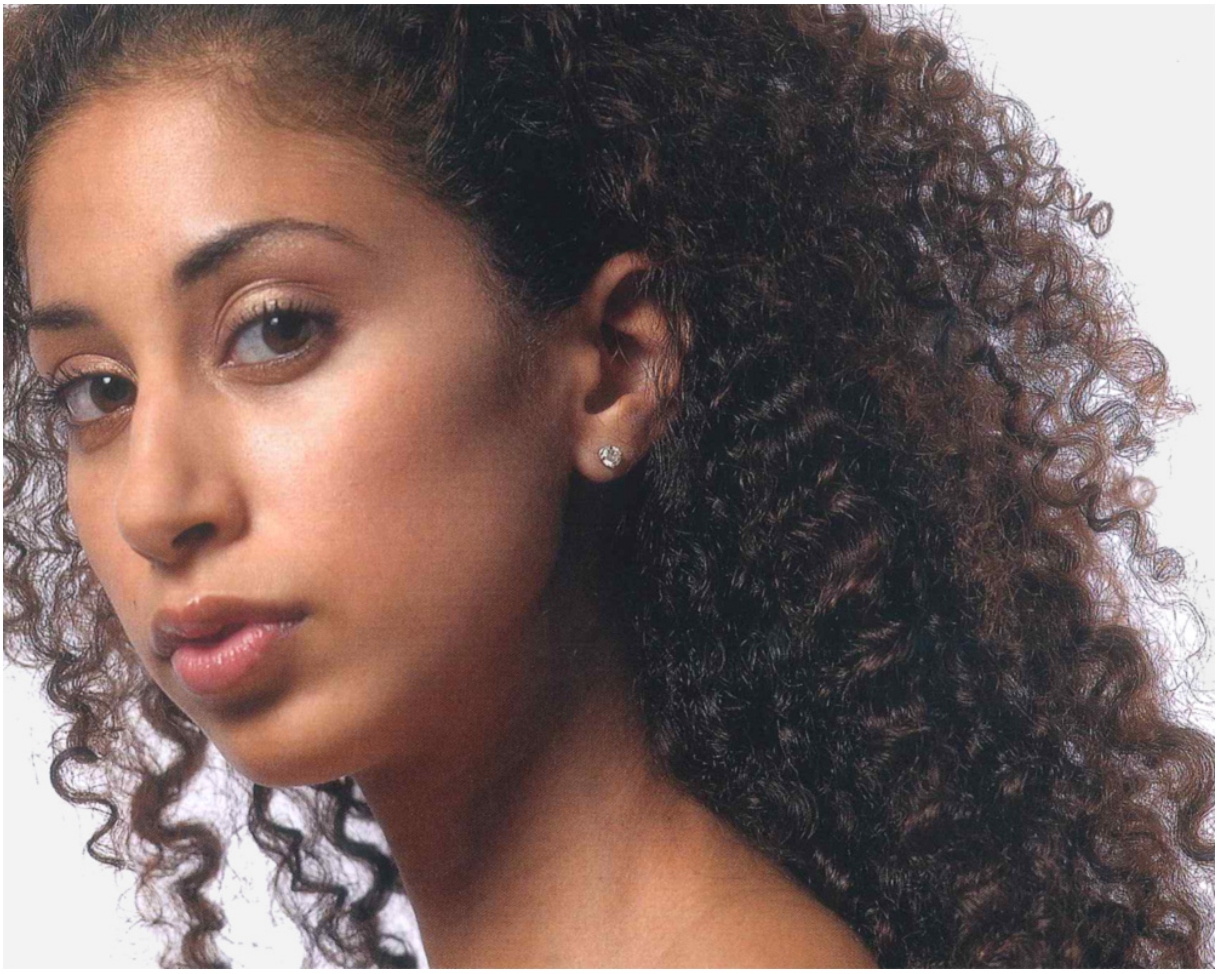
Arts & Humanities

Pointe Taken

After a knee injury nearly ended her career, Alicia Graf '03GS is back on her toes.

By
Beth Kwon
|
Fall 2006



Lois Greenfield

In an airy rehearsal space at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Alicia Graf is locked in a lover’s spat. The studio is expansive and bright, and sun streams in

through floor-to-ceiling windows that yield a cloudless view of the Manhattan skyline. But it's impossible not to focus solely on Graf as she breaks away from her partner's embrace and faces him, hands on her hips. Her director, Carmen de Lavallade, is telling her not to feel sorry for herself. "You're saying, 'You are *not* going to bother me. I'm taking my life *back*,'" says de Lavallade, an Ailey legend for whom the piece, *Portrait of Billie*, a tribute to Billie Holiday, was created in 1960.

To portray Holiday's stormy history, Graf '03GS must act as much as dance. Accompanied by "Gee Baby, Ain't I Good to You," she silently threatens to punch her partner, enraged, and then, later, wraps herself around him in a passionate embrace. Segments of parallel pliés and pirouettes break up the tension in the piece, and the varying moods could be interpreted as not just the complex relationship of two lovers, but an existential struggle. Ailey is restaging the piece this winter with 27-year-old Graf as the lead. Her performance is filled with intensity and defiance; she knows about taking back one's life.

In 1998, Graf was the belle of the Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH). Slender and striking, she impressed audiences as the Siren in George Balanchine's *Prodigal Son*. *The New York Times*' Anna Kisselgoff described Graf as a "sensation" and her portrayal of the temptress as "predatory and sinuous." When DTH celebrated its 30th anniversary in 1999, the company put Graf on its posters.

Then, she developed an inexplicable injury. Her right knee swelled up, and she couldn't straighten her leg or bend it fully. Her doctor drained the knee, but the symptoms persisted, and an MRI revealed torn cartilage. After two surgeries, Graf could barely walk, and the muscles in her leg atrophied. "The posters were everywhere — on subways and buses," she recalls. "It was torture. I would see one and just start crying." The dance world's newest star could no longer dance.

Over the next year, Graf consulted a dozen doctors in New York, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., none of whom could fix the problem. "I was frustrated and depressed," Graf says. "Eventually, I said, 'Well you know what? I'm not going to be a dancer anymore. I'm going to go to school.'" She had been living on 123rd Street and Amsterdam Avenue, and knew Columbia students and the campus. "It was my first choice," she says. "I put all of my eggs in one basket to see if I could get in."

Graf was accepted to the School of General Studies (GS), the University's undergraduate college for people whose studies have been interrupted for personal

or professional reasons. She started in 2000 with no idea of what she wanted to do, or even could do outside of dancing. “In high school I didn’t have a social life, and I was never part of a club,” she says. “So when I went back to school, I was like, ‘I want to be in this club, and I want to be in that one!’ I just had fun doing everything that I had never done before.”

Graf joined the Black Students Association, organizing fashion fundraising shows and volunteer programs for children. She was the associate artistic director for A Time to Dance, a “praise dance” group on campus that incorporates faith in its performances. (It is now based at Riverside Church.) Graf and a friend from the troupe also started a performing-arts program at a school in the Bronx.

At GS, Graf shifted her drive to academics. “I’m a nerd at heart,” says Graf, who is soft-spoken but playful. “I could spend hours in the library and I wouldn’t even notice that the time had passed.” She interned at *Essence* and JP Morgan, and majored in history. Graf wrote her thesis on the Dance Theatre of Harlem, her former employer and one of the first internationally acclaimed African-American ballet companies. What started as a simple history of the company evolved into a complex study of how the Theatre navigated discrimination against blacks in classical ballet and the politics of funding for nonprofit organizations. “Alicia discussed the company’s history in nuance,” says Eric Foner, DeWitt Clinton Professor of History and Graf’s thesis adviser. “No one had really written this piece of history before.”

First Steps

While she was still in diapers, Graf would sit on the floor with her mother looking at pictures of dancers in the arts section of the newspaper. She grew up in the planned community of Columbia, Md., located between Washington and Baltimore. Her mother Martha enrolled her in a local dance class when she was 3, and she began training competitively when she was 12. “Alicia always told me, ‘If I can get into a dance company, I’ll be happy just to be a tree.’”

Arthur Mitchell, co-founder of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, discovered Graf when she was a 13-year-old student at a program for young dancers at the Kennedy Center in Washington. He brought her to New York at 17. “Alicia has a rare gift,” says Mitchell. “There are many good dancers, but she has been chosen.” On stage,

Graf is enchanting; Mitchell compares her to Josephine Baker or Margot Fonteyn, who with Rudolf Nureyev formed one of the greatest partnerships in ballet. Graf is 5'10", tall by classical ballet standards. Height can be a hindrance: Companies prefer dancers in the corps to be uniform in height, and it's challenging to find tall male leads (Mikhail Baryshnikov is 5'7"). Long legs and arms often make for lankiness, but Graf is graceful, not gangly. Critics love every inch of her. "She has remarkable arms and hands, effortless extensions, and wonderful feet," wrote the *Times*' dance critic John Rockwell last December during Graf's first season with Ailey.

Raising the Barre

Graf's recovery from her knee injury began shortly after she arrived at Columbia. The route to a correct diagnosis was convoluted, but finally a cousin who is a rheumatologist identified her condition as reactive arthritis. By then, she was physically and emotionally drained. She underwent more surgery, and her cousin prescribed medication and a strict physical-therapy regimen. "Everything calmed down, but I didn't even want to dance again," Graf says. "I didn't want to move or put myself through that type of physical stress."

But as she recuperated and built up strength, she ventured timidly back to dance. She took a ballet class at Barnard, although she stayed in the back of the room. As a senior she thought seriously about competing again. Graf graduated magna cum laude in 2003 and, despite a job offer from JP Morgan, decided to give dancing another shot. Mitchell welcomed her back to DTH, but it shut down in 2004 amid questions surrounding its finances.

Graf approached the American Ballet Theatre and the New York City Ballet; ABT told her she was too tall, and NYCB said they weren't hiring. Graf's mother is black and her father is white; there was some speculation in the press that she had experienced the discrimination in classical ballet that she had explored in her thesis at Columbia. There are very few black ballerinas in established companies, but Graf's height is a significant disadvantage, and she is the last person to point to racial factors. "The ballet world is prejudiced in many ways," she says. "But I refuse to play the race card when things don't work to my favor. I believe I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be."

Alvin Ailey brought Graf on last year, where she fit right in. Modern dance is earthier than ballet, and Ailey dancers range from those with compact athletic builds to those with long, lithe figures such as Graf's.

"Alicia is a real asset," says Ailey's artistic director Judith Jamison '00HON, herself a classically trained ballerina. "It's not that frequent that dancers are injured and then pull themselves back together. There has to be a big need for it, where you can't breathe unless you dance. Alicia has that need."

The knee, however, is still in question. Her condition was in remission for several years, but in July she had a flare-up. Her cousin put her on medication, and she decided to sit out Ailey's summer tour in Paris while she recuperated and trained on her own in New York. Graf lives in Brooklyn at her brother and sister-in-law's home, along with another brother and sister. "Alicia makes a big effort to spend time with family and friends," says Rhonda Jordan '05SEAS, a friend of Graf's from college who worked with A Time to Dance and helped her start the performing-arts program in the Bronx. "When she's out of town she texts or e-mails even though her schedule is busy." Jordan sees Graf perform at every opportunity. "She is one of the most talented, humble people I know."

The choreography of *Portrait of Billie* is spare, and Carmen de Lavallade's directions are counterintuitive. "Don't dance it, don't dance it!" she tells Graf.

"This is one of the hardest roles for me because it's more acting, and I can't express things verbally," says Graf. In the final section, accompanied by "No More," she depicts Holiday's deterioration at the end of her life by stumbling across the stage. It's a final act for Holiday, but not for Graf. She has ideas of going to law school when she retires. "I used to have this fear in the back of my mind: 'What if I get injured? What am I going to do with my life?'" she says. "But now I know I'll be fine in whatever I choose to do. I'm excited about life outside of dancing."

Read more from ***Beth Kwon***

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
*Read more from **Beth Kwon***