

JGLIVING

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Harlem exhibit brings best of dance, art to city

Keiara Carr The Journal Gazette



If you go

What: "Dance Theatre of Harlem: 40 Years of Firsts"

When: Opens today; exhibit ends March 15

Where: Fort Wayne Museum of Art, 311 E. Main St.

Admission: \$7 adults, \$5 students and seniors over 65, \$20 families and free for members; free admission every Thursday 5 to 8 p.m.; call 422-6467 or www.fwmoa.org

With most exhibits curated in-house at Fort Wayne Museum of Art, the traveling exhibit "Dance Theatre of Harlem: 40 Years of Firsts" had to raise the bar – or barre if you will.

"We pride ourselves on bringing the best, most diverse kinds of exhibits to the public," executive director Charles Shepard says. "We generate about 95 percent of our own shows instead of renting, so this (traveling exhibit) becomes a part of the 5 percent, because it was so good, we couldn't resist it."

Opening today, the museum's new exhibit guides viewers through the Dance Theatre of Harlem's most groundbreaking moments that dispelled the myth that people of African descent were not physically suited for classical dance.

The company was founded by renowned dancer and choreographer Arthur Mitchell and his mentor, choreographer Karel Shook, in the early 1970s. The exhibit features four of the company's most iconic ballets: "A Street Car Named Desire," "Creole Giselle," "Dougla" and "Firebird." It also has 22 costumes, set pieces, historical video excerpts, fashion sketches, tour posters and photographs.

Shepard says he was searching through potential jewelry and textile exhibits when he was introduced to the "Dance Theatre of Harlem." Although he says that the museum is working on a jewelry exhibit for 2016, finding a clothing exhibit had been tougher.

“We have an interest in a much broader spectrum of what is artistic than a lot of other museums,” Shepard says. “When I heard about the ‘Dance Theatre of Harlem,’ I thought this is it. I got costumes, I got set design, accessories, theater posters – every aspect of what dance theater is about, which is art, art, art.”

On the current tour, the exhibit has traveled to Irving Arts Center in Irving, Texas; National Museum of Dance in Saratoga Springs, New York; and this spring will be displayed at the Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture in Baltimore, but the FWMOA is the only institution solely devoted to fine art on the schedule so far.

Shepard thinks it makes a difference.

“Typically, the first-line viewer is coming in to see fine art, so No. 1, that viewer is going to probably pay attention to a show that they might not have gone to a dance museum to see – it’s a new exposure,” he says. “Second thing is, I think that people who like dance, and like set design, which I think we have a lot of in this region, they’re going to come out to see this exhibit, and they may never have gone to a fine art museum. So I think we’re kind of cross-pollinating audiences.”

Perhaps it isn’t that much of a stretch.

In fact, the Dance Theatre of Harlem made its professional New York debut in 1971 among the collections of modern art at the Guggenheim Museum.

Years before the debut, Mitchell had met Shook as a teenager at the Katherine Dunham School of Dance in New York.

After graduation, Mitchell was offered a scholarship to the New York City Ballet’s School of American Ballet. In 1955, Mitchell became the first black man to be a permanent member of a major ballet company when he was selected to join New York City Ballet.

Fifteen years later, motivated into action by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Mitchell and Shook founded a multicultural dance school for the youth in Harlem. By the ’70s, the school had turned into the full-fledged Dance Theatre of Harlem, featuring classes in multiple styles of dance, acting, music appreciation and theory, sewing and tailoring, along with a repertoire of both contemporary and classical dance presentations.

The company was backed by renowned choreographers, composers and costume designers, including George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, Geoffrey Holder and Zeldia Wynn.

The company now is considered a leading dance institution, with a professional touring company, school ensemble and “Dancing Through Barriers” outreach program, which brought the Dance Theatre of Harlem troupe to Fort Wayne in 1998.

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“I have a feeling that people who years ago chose not to go see the Dance Theatre of Harlem on stage, might come to this show because it’s not a dance, but it’s all about the dance,” Shepard says. “Maybe they’ll kind of kick themselves and go, ‘Well, why didn’t I go when they were performing here?’”

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